

Fast-Forward

Chapter One: Juliet

With a fat red quill, Ginny Peregrine drew a lazy circle around a job advert in the Daily Prophet. She chewed her thumbnail thoughtfully.

“What do you think of working in an Owlery?” she asked of her best friend, Grace Hartwin (whose house she was staying at), sprawled out on the floor.

“For you?” Grace raised her eyebrows. “I’m not going to comment, but I’ll remind you of the scratches all over you.”

Ginny held up her hands to observe the thin red welts on her skin. “That’s different,” she said crossly, scowling. “Your owl is vicious.”

“Astor is lovely,” Grace said defensively. “You just don’t mix with birds.”

“...Fine.” The redhead pouted. She scratched an X through the circle she’d drawn previously, and dropped her chin down onto the newspaper with a glum sigh. “I’m the only one now you doesn’t have a job...” She rolled her eyes. Alden was training with his father to become a Ministry lawyer, and Philippa was currently tending a bar in East London to get enough money for a university application. “I feel like a hobo.”

“You are a hobo,” Grace laughed. “Still, I don’t have a job.”

“Yeah, because you’re going to live it up in medical school,” Ginny pointed. “That qualifies as the same sort of thing.” She sighed again. “I suppose, if the worst comes to worst, I could always dance in the streets and try to get people to put money in my hat.”

“You can’t dance.”

“That’s why it’s my last option.”

Grace pushed away the application form for which course she wanted to take at the medical school she'd applied for. She wanted to be a Healer, but was enrolling in Muggle training to get all areas of expertise down perfect. She stretched out on the carpet and sat up. "I was wondering..."

"Why you're the one lying on the floor when it's your bedroom?" Ginny guessed.

"Well, that, yeah. But mainly, I was wondering why you've so far totally avoided talking to me about something fairly important." Grace's blue eyes flickered down the glimmering ring on Ginny's finger.

"Um." Ginny went red. "Hey, look!" she exclaimed, pointing at the Daily Prophet. "I could be a-"

"No avoiding." The brunette reached over to her bed and snatched the paper away.

Ginny hid her face in a nearby cushion and groaned loudly. "I don't want to talk about it," she said, her voice a muffled mutter because of the fabric she was surrounded by.

For the most part, Grace was incredulous. "You're committing to spending the rest of life with someone, and you don't want to talk about it?"

"That sounds about right." Ginny shifted uncomfortably, and sighed. "I dunno. I'm not getting cold feet or anything. I just..." She made a 'merghf' noise and buried her face once more in the cushion wrapped in her arms.

"Scared?"

Another groan answered this enquiry.

"Good. You'd be a retard not be scared."

Ginny sat up, irritation on her face. "Oh, fantastic. It doesn't really matter that I'm terrified out of my wits because of a choice that I made in three seconds that's going to change my life forever... as long as I'm not a retard."

"You love him. He loves you. This is everything you could have possibly wanted. But now that you have it, you're frightened of how it could turn out." Grace made a sympathetic face. "It's going to be fine."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd learnt the hard way that if something seems too good to be true, then it probably is."

"Stop holding onto the bad things you've known and look ahead at the good things you're going to have."

"You sound like something out of a cheesy romantic comedy."

"...Yeah, I stole it from somewhere," Grace admitted. "I can't remember where I found it, but it's good, isn't it?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and took the newspaper back from her friend. Just as she flipped to the next page, a tall brown-haired man stuck his head through the door. "Oi," he said. "Lunch."

"Coming..." Grace sang.

"Now."

"I said I was coming, Jake!" Grace snapped.

"You're not moving," said twenty-three-year-old Jacob Hartwin, lifting one eyebrow mockingly. "When someone comes somewhere, they usually move."

"RARGH!" yelled Grace, tossing a spare cushion from the armchair nearby at her brother. "Go away."

Jacob retreated, and Grace turned back to Ginny. "Let's roll." They stood, and as they made their way down the hallway, the brunette asked, "Soooo... when's the big day?"

"I dunno." Ginny combed the ends of her hair with her fingers. "We were thinking January, February-ish. Late Winter. Spring. I dunno."

"What have you planned so far?"

"Er. Not much."

"How little is 'not much'?"

Ginny grimaced. "Nothing?" she tried, wincing in anticipation of her best friend's reaction.

"Ginny!" Grace exclaimed. "You have to decide, or you're going to leave everything to the last minute and it's going to be a rubbish wedding."

"Geez," Ginny frowned. "You sound like my mother." Images of a warm, smiling Molly Weasley flashed back, but she banished those. The last thing that she needed was to start remembering now that her mother wasn't going to be there to sob into a tissue at her only daughter growing up, and that her father wasn't going to give her away. It would start the tears up. "Anyway, I have loads of time."

"Coolsville – though you need to talk to Romeo about it as soon as possible, I'm not going to get involved. Now... the real question." She eyed Ginny. "Am I invited?"

"Duh. Your whole family is." Ginny knew how Harry had always felt with the Weasleys now – an orphan, included in something warm and special. "You're like my own family."

"Even Jake?" asked Grace sarcastically.

"Surprisingly, even Jake," said Ginny.

“I’m touched,” Jacob threw over his shoulders, emerging from the study and jogging down the stairs. Ginny peered into the room where he’d just come from. She didn’t remember that room existing. Grace was, quite frankly, filthy rich, and her house was almost a mansion, it was so big.

“Anyway,” she continued, “you’re a bridesmaid, so you have to be invited.”

At this, Grace glowed with pleased pride. “Bridesmaid? Really?” she squeaked. “Yay! Who else are bridesmaids?”

“Pippa and Heather.”

“Heather? Well, you seem to have got over your aversion to her,” said Grace as she found her way to the dining room, and sat down.

“She had an aversion to me, thank you very much – but we’re past that. I helped her; she helped me. She’s like the little sister I never had.” Ginny smiled fondly, thinking of her friend, Heather, who would now be in her second year at Hogwarts.

“Aw,” Grace cooed, sitting in her usual seat at the table, “that’s so sweet. You know, since her sister...” she trailed off meaningfully. Ginny understood. Heather Tristanebury was the younger sister of Moaning Myrtle, one of the castle’s ghosts.

“Piggie!” said Grace’s other sibling – however, Leah was only five, and liked to refer to Ginny as Piggie, due to the fact that she associated Ginny with guinea-pig. “Hello. We’re having scrambled eggs.”

“I can see that. I like scrambled eggs,” said Ginny to the little girl. “Thanks!”

“And toast!” Leah added.

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure you want her to come to your wedding?” asked Grace. “Halfway through exchanging your vows or whatever, everyone will just suddenly hear someone shriek, ‘Piggie!’”

“That would be funny,” said Ginny, pushing her eggs around her plate with her fork and stabbing some into her mouth. “I could hire her as an entertainer incase it gets too boring.” She pursed her mouth thoughtfully. “I’ve just realised that I hate weddings.”

“Everyone hates weddings – except their own,” Grace amended, seeing Ginny’s face.

“You’d better be right about that.” Ginny looked up at Grace’s mother, who had just made her appearance into the massive dining room. “Is there anything I can help with after lunch, Mrs. Hartwin?” She hated doing jobs, but she knew that people wouldn’t like having her around unless she was helpful.

“No, thank you, though, sweetie,” said Dorothy Hartwin, sitting down to enjoy her own lunch.

“Speaking of pushing your weight around,” said Grace around a mouthful of eggs, “when are you going to move in with Romeo?”

“Grace!” exclaimed Dorothy. She turned to Ginny. “Don’t worry – you’re perfectly welcome to stay here as long as you want, it’s been lovely having you.”

“Mum, it was just a question,” Grace complained. “Seriously, though, are you just going to marry him, run off into the sunset, and then come back to my house?”

“I don’t know,” Ginny said. “At some point. And by the way, I’d appreciate it if you stop calling him Romeo.”

“Whatever, Juliet.” Grace stuffed more eggs into her mouth.

“Piggie has a boyfriend!” Leah said happily. “Did you know?”

“Yes, we know,” Grace said wearily for what was the millionth time. Since Leah had discovered this, it became her hobby to announce it as often as possible.

“Our little baby’s all grown up,” said Jacob, dumping himself in a chair. “Isn’t that sweet?”

“You,” Ginny said, pointing a fork at him, “stop patronising me. I know a hundred-and-twelve legal ways to make your life hell.”

“Really?” Jacob nodded, as if considering this. “I know a hundred-and-thirteen.” He grinned. “Touché.”

Ginny rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah.” She finished her last mouthful of toast and then wiped her hands off on her dungarees, even though she really wasn’t supposed to. “Thanks for lunch,” she said, and carried her dishes through to the kitchen. It was the only place that she’d memorised her way to, as she could live without the numerous studies and sitting rooms, but in a time of trouble, she needed to be able to find the chocolate.

Grace followed a minute later, and then they decided to go out into Grace’s garden – though, honestly, it was more like her grounds, as she had at least two acres.

“Meh, you’re so rich it’s annoying,” Ginny scowled. “You could set up an amusement park in your garden – that’s how big it is.”

“Er.” Grace didn’t really know what to say. Ginny understood her silence. What modesty could she say – oh, it’s not that good? It was, and she could see that.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ginny dismissed the brunette’s discomfort. “Sorry for making you feel awkward. I’m fine.”

“Okay. Well, tell Romeo-”

Ginny glared.

“Er- tell Tom, I mean, that you need to start discussing the wedding if you ever want to have it,” Grace advised. “If you don’t, then I’m going to have to be forced to be your wedding planner.”

“Oh, dear God.”

“Exactly.” Grace grinned. “Tell him.”

The redhead agreed, and they moved onto talking of less nerve-wracking things (for Ginny, at least), but it meant by no means that the anxiety building up inside her had disappeared. Quite the contrary – it was building higher than ever.

xxx

A/N: Hooray! What an... uninteresting start. Oh well. Trust me, it gets better. Sorry that this chapter is so short. For all of the other chapters, I tried my hardest to keep them at least eight pages long (in Microsoft Word). Well, this is seven pages. XP Please review and tell me what you think so far!

Also, I would like to point out that I know that Jacob and Leah Hartwin have werewolf names from Twilight. That’s a coincidence. I decided what Grace’s brother and sister were going to be called before I even starting reading Twilight.

Chapter Two: Five Minutes Fast

“Er- tell Tom, I mean, that you need to start discussing the wedding if you ever want to have it,” Grace advised. “If you don’t, then I’m going to have to be forced to be your wedding planner.”

The redhead agreed, and they moved onto talking of less nerve-wracking things (for Ginny, at least), but it meant by no means that the anxiety building up inside her had disappeared. Quite the contrary – it was building higher than ever.

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Ginny stood in the doorway of Flourish and Blott’s, fiddling with her hair and waiting for Tom to notice that she was there. He was helping a little old lady at the back of the shop to get a book from the top shelf, which was easy for him, as he barely even had to reach up for it, he was so tall.

She couldn’t help but notice that she probably wouldn’t have been able to reach it either.

“I presume that you want to buy it, then?” she heard his quiet voice faintly, and then moved towards the till to take her money and get a receipt written out for her.

“Yes,” the old lady said in her creaky voice. “Thank you, dearie.”

Tom looked less than happy to be called dearie by a total stranger, but didn’t say anything. He instead told her the price, and as he reached over for a quill to write the receipt with, his eyes finally fell on the redheaded girl in the doorway.

Grinning, Ginny lifted one hand to wave and knocked a lamp over.

With a yelp, she threw herself forwards and caught it in her fingertips, before setting it gently back on the table she’d knocked it from.

Oh, great. What an impressive entrance.

Tom was now finishing off the old woman's receipt. He took a handful of coins, dropped with a plink in the till, and then made his way towards Ginny, weaving with ease between the many bookcases and piles of books.

"Hello," Ginny chirped.

"Three seconds you were in the shop and you already came close to destroying it," Tom said, shaking his head.

"More like ten seconds," she said defensively, "and anyway, it was only one lamp. And I caught it."

"Make your excuses," he said mockingly, but his smirk was closer to a smile, and he ducked his head to kiss her.

"Is it your lunch break yet?" Ginny looked at the clock. "As interesting as it is watching you move books around endlessly, I'm hungry."

"Hm." Tom also glanced across at the clock thoughtfully. "Oh. Will you look at that?" he said. "It just became five minutes fast." He took her hand and silently slipped out of the bookshop, the hush of his movements spoiled by her clumsy loudness.

"Where to?"

"According to my eavesdropping skills, there's a new Italian restaurant down by Gringott's," Tom suggested.

"You shouldn't listen to other people's conversation," Ginny reproached.

"I usually don't. I don't really care for hearing about what total strangers did over the weekend, but I was considering where to take you for lunch and I overheard someone talking about Giovanni's. Or something like that."

It was, indeed, Giovanni's, and Ginny praised Tom's Italian skills as they found a table outside, under the sun.

“So how does it feel, knowing that it’s September the twentieth, and that you should be in school, but you’re not?” Tom asked.

“Weird.” Ginny absent-mindedly folded her napkin into a hat, something that she had learnt from her brother Charlie when she was about seven, and had been immensely pleased with at the time. “I keep seeing the date and thinking, arggh! I’m missing school! And I just go, ohh yeahh... I don’t go to school anymore.”

“What sort of job are you thinking about looking for?” He smirked. “Hat-making?”

Ginny grinned, putting her napkin-hat on her head. However, the waiter gave her an alarmed look, so she took it off and decided that it worked better as a napkin. “Er,” she said, like the intelligent, well-spoken genius that she was. “I dunno.”

“I can help you find one if you want,” Tom offered.

“Ooh, thank you!” she beamed.

The waiter who had stared at Ginny in fright now came over with a menu and waited while they scanned over the items there.

“Would you like to get two pizzas or do you want to share?” Tom asked, looking over the top of his menu.

Only the top of Ginny’s fluffy red-haired head was visible, and she flapped the menu down so that her face was visible – twisted slightly in a guilty expression. Though she didn’t answer, her stomach made its loud, complaining response in her favour.

Tom raised his eyebrows slightly. “Two pizzas,” he translated.

Ginny handed her menu back to the waiter and pouted. “Sorry,” she said sheepishly. “I’m so unromantic.”

“It’s fine.”

“Oh!” Ginny recalled what Grace had said to her. “On that topic... Grace got in a huff with me and insisted that I talk to you about the, er, you know.” She still felt strange saying wedding out loud.

“Wedding?” he said for her, seeming to have no trouble with saying it, though the slight smile that appeared was accompanied by a tinge of pink high on his cheeks.

“That.” She nodded.

“Okay.” Tom looked down at her, taller than her even though they were both seated. “What about it?”

Ginny shrugged. “She says we need to be more organised.”

“Ah.” Tom frowned down at his glass of water, which came with the meal. “Alright.”

There was a pause of silence while the two ex-Slytherins sat in uncertainty, wondering if they should say something first. Then, at the same time, they both spoke.

“Oh, you first.” Ginny sat back in her chair as the waiter delivered two pizzas, beamed, “Grazie!” at him, and then promptly began to devour her pizza at an astonishing rate, looking up at Tom expectantly.

“Okay...” Tom poked his pizza with a knife. “Well... we said spring, didn’t we, for the date?”

Ginny nodded. “Mm-hm.” She swallowed down a mouthful of cheese and tomato. “Or late winter, maybe. The end of February.”

Tom considered this. “I like the sound of February.”

“Me too.”

“How does February the twenty-eighth sound?” Tom asked. “A tie between spring and winter.”

“I like it.” Ginny grinned, and leant over the table to steal a slice of his pizza.

xxx

Philippa had a job as a Muggle bartender in London, and she offered to see if Ginny could work there as well. The boss, a burly man named Steve, gave her a trial evening to see if she was any good.

She wasn't.

She pulled the handle off the beer keg and flooded the bar. She dropped a bottle of nineteenth-century wine on its way to a wine-merchant. She pulled open a bag of salted peanuts so viciously that the contents exploded everywhere. She fell over on her way to a table, smashing a nearby chair and throwing the drinks she was holding all over Steve himself – destroying his cashmere coat.

In the end, even Philippa batting her beautiful eyelashes couldn't keep Ginny the job.

“I'm really sorry,” Ginny muttered for the hundredth time.

“I'm the one who just be sorry,” Philippa corrected, looking abashed. “I should have remembered how clumsy you are. Are you sure that you don't want me to pay the fine for you?”

“No, I'm alright.” Ginny sighed. “There goes Tom's Christmas present.”

Philippa rolled her eyes. “I'll pay,” she said, and promptly parted with nine-hundred pounds damage expenses.

Ginny decided to organise her own job. She applied for the occupation of an assistant in the Muggle National Art Gallery, which she thought would be good, as she liked art, and it was close to Diagon Alley, so she could have her lunch-breaks with Tom.

The manager of the gallery was named Viola, and also had scarlet hair, though Ginny doubted that hers was natural. This made her very

smug. Viola seemed keen for Ginny to try out, and Ginny was determined not to screw up.

It was because of this that she only destroyed one thing, as opposed to six things.

The difference was that the statue of Aphrodite that she knocked over was priceless Greek marble.

And so, she lost her job very quickly when Viola found her star assistant crouching on the tiled floor surrounded by shards of glittery marble, trying to fix Aphrodite's chiselled nose back onto her severed head.

"I could have fixed it with magic," Ginny grumbled to Grace. "I didn't have time to, though."

"It doesn't matter," Grace sighed, writing the postcode of the National Art Gallery on a fat envelope with twelve-thousand pounds inside.

Then, Ginny found a job, and she was positive that she'd hit a jackpot. She turned up at the Daily Prophet Headquarters (well, just an office block, really) on the fourth of October, having actually brushed her hair, and before she stepped through the massive revolving doors, prayed that she wouldn't blow this chance as well.

"Hi," she said nervously to the receptionist. "Er. I'm Ginny Peregrine... I was told that I could take the job on probation?"

The receptionist looked extremely bored, staring at her with fishy eyes through her glasses. "Third floor. Report to Angeline." She gave her a pre-made badge that declared: HI! I AM... Ginevra Peregrine.

"Thanks," Ginny muttered, and moved towards the stairwell, pinning the badge to the front of her jumper. Three flights of stairs later, she was clutching a stitch in her side. She hadn't done anything remotely athletic since the end of last school year's Quidditch season, and it was coming back to haunt her. "Stupid stairs."

She moved through a pair of heavy doors and found herself in a large room with tiny corridors made from the walls of grey work-cubicles. At the end of the room was a glass wall with a door, where the words were emblazoned:

A. Storne

Head of Media

Editor

Ginny presumed that the 'A' stood for Angeline, and made her way through the room to the glass door, receiving a few mildly interested stares.

Breathe. Try to be mature. Don't knock anything over. Avoid lumpy carpets. Stay away from fragile things.

She took a deep breath, and lifted her hand to knock on the door, but before her knuckles could make contact with the wooden panelling on the sides, it swung open.

"Come in," said a sophisticated voice, and all of Ginny's hopes at being urbane disappeared. She trailed through the doorway and looked across at where the voice had come from.

Sitting lazily behind an expensive-looking desk was a woman a few years older than Ginny, with a feline-like debonair about the way she idly drummed her manicured fingernails on the wooden table-top. She was tall, as was evident from how high the desk was, and beautiful in an effortless sort of way. Her sleek brown hair fell in wide, loose curls, untidily around a face fit only for archangels, her large almond-shaped eyes the colour of latte, soft, but somehow vicious.

"Ginevra Peregrine, is it?" said the woman.

"Ginny."

"Ginevra." The woman stood, flicking her curls over one shoulder, adjusting her expensive-looking neck-scarf, and offered an elegant

hand for Ginny to shake. "Allow me to introduce myself... my name is Angeline Storne." She gave Ginny a cool stare. "Now, I feel I must make you aware, if you were not already.... my last name being identical to that of the Head of the Daily Prophet is no coincidence – the manager, Edward Storne, is my father, and with a click from my fingers, daddy will make your life hell."

Ginny blinked. Nice to meet you too.

"You've been hired," Angeline continued, resting one long-fingered hand on the front of her desk, "to do what I want, when I want. If it's not my satisfaction..." she smirked, stretching bow-lips and displaying neat, even teeth, "then I'll just have to click my fingers."

Resisting the urge to slap her new boss and run, Ginny clenched her hands behind her. "Of course," she said sweetly. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"Right now?" Angeline considered this. "A coffee." She lifted one slim, arched eyebrow. "Make it perfect."

Ginny hurried out, and for several minutes wandered around lost trying to find the refreshments area. Once located, she saw that it was already occupied.

The person occupying it turned around. She was small, not much taller than Ginny, slightly chubby, with short dark brown hair and keen grey eyes. "You're the new kid, aren't you?"

"Kid?" Ginny was offended. "I'm short, but I'm eighteen."

The woman, picking up a cup of tea, smirked. "I rest my case. I'm nearly twenty-two." She cast her eyes over Ginny. "Does Angeline like you?"

"Er. I couldn't tell."

"Oh. She doesn't. If she likes you, then believe me, you'll know." The woman rolled her eyes. "She'll be all over you with compliments and promotions and little gifts."

“Okay, then, she probably hated me.” Ginny twisted her mouth thoughtfully. “How do I make the perfect coffee?”

The woman nodded in understanding. “Her first little test. D’you want me to make it for you?”

“Yeah, thanks,” said Ginny gratefully. “I can’t cook; I manage to burn water.”

“No problem. See, look – not much milk, a lot of cream, two spoonfuls of coffee, as much sugar as you can fit in the cup, and a bar of chocolate on the side.” The woman presented the cup to her. “Oh! And this-” she reached over to rattle through the tray of teaspoons, “- is her favourite spoon. Don’t ask me why – I don’t know.”

“Thanks,” Ginny said again. “I’m Ginny.”

“Beth.” She smirked. “See you around, kid.”

Carefully focusing on not sloshing the coffee everywhere and not tripping over something, Ginny found her way back to Angeline’s office. “Here,” she said proudly once she made her way safely there. “The perfect coffee.”

Angeline took it, stirred once, and sniffed it. “Not bad,” she remarked. “I expected you to take at least ten minutes, and do it wrong.” She frowned slightly, and sniffed it again. “Smells like Menzies,” she muttered.

“Excuse me?” Ginny asked politely, not quite sure what a Menzies was.

“Did a woman named Elizabeth Menzies help you?” Angeline asked, fixing her sharp eyes on the redhead in front of her.

“Oh – no,” Ginny lied as she understood, and forced a smile. “That’s just the way I like my coffees.” This was the biggest lie of all. She hated coffee. She hoped that someone giving her coffee made in that way would never test this lie. Lying to the boss was not a good start.

Angeline only looked intently at her for a while, before saying, "Yes. Forgive me." With her expression cold, she sat back down at her desk, and the look that she gave Ginny made it clear that she wasn't welcome there anymore.

Ginny slipped out of the door and sighed, pressing her back against the cold glass. It was going to be a long day.

xxx

A/N: Yay, Ginny has a job. I read on the Harry Potter Lexicon on the Internet that in canon, when Ginny grew up she worked first as a Chaser for the Holyhead Harpies, and then quit to work in the Daily Prophet. And I thought that newspaper-y stuff really suited her. And according to the Twilight Lexicon, I have the same birthday as Edward Cullen! GO ME. I don't really like Edward that much anyway, so it's kind of dumb. Oh well.

I'm really obsessed with If She Knew by Lemar right now. It's perfect for the whole Rewind-PressPlay-FastForward trilogy. Love it. Wonderful song. Anyway. Please reviewwww!

Chapter Three: Elbow Time

Angeline only looked intently at her for a while, before saying, "Yes. Forgive me." With her expression cold, she sat back down at her desk, and the look that she gave Ginny made it clear that she wasn't welcome there anymore.

Ginny slipped out of the door and sighed, pressing her back against the cold glass. It was going to be a long day.

xxx

Knock-knock-knock.

Ginny put her hands inside the pockets of her bomber jacket and swayed from side to side, humming as she waited for Tom to answer the door. As it was a Saturday and neither of them had to work (she'd managed to keep her job for a week so far), they'd organised for her to come over to his apartment for lunch.

For a few seconds, nothing happened, and then the door swung inwards. "Good afternoon," said Tom simply, balancing the heavy door open with his foot, as it liked to close on people by itself, and then ducking his head to give the redhead a quick but lingering kiss.

"What's for lunch?" she asked brightly, stepping past him when they pulled away, so that he could close the door.

"Well-"

"I'm not going to have to help, am I?" Ginny asked worriedly, pulling off her bomber jacket and tossing it in the direction of the coat-rack, like she'd seen in a movie. She missed, and traipsed over to put it on the rack properly.

A small sarcastic exhalation came from the kitchen. "Letting you cook would be suicide."

"True." Ginny kicked off her shoes untidily, but then remembered how tidy Tom liked to have everything, and pushed them neatly up against

the wall before skipping through to the kitchen. "Mm. Smells good. So what is it?"

"Chicken." Tom poked something in a pan with a wooden spoon. "And greens. Broccoli. That kind of thing."

"Not too keen on broccoli," Ginny murmured, pulling a face.

"Then don't eat it!" Tom said wearily. "I'm not going to cook for you again... you're so picky."

"I'm not! I'll eat it, I promise." Ginny fluttered her eyelashes sweetly at him. "I'll even ask for seconds."

"Just sit down. It will be ready in a moment." Tom gestured ambiguously with his spoon towards the small dining table. Ginny sat down there, and counted only two minutes before Tom came through with two plates. "I apologise in advance... I can't really cook."

"Hey, if it won't kill me, then you're doing better than I could," Ginny pointed out, picking up her fork and stabbing a piece of chicken. "How are you, then?"

"Not bad." Tom frowned. "Mr. Flourish is sick, and is considering promoting me to admissions assistant, due to the fact that he no longer feels he is able."

"Ooh!" the redhead tried to clap her hands for him, but instead accidentally threw her fork across the room. "I'll get that." She scurried across the room, grabbed her fork, blew on it for imaginary dust, and then returned to the table. "Will you get higher wages, then?"

"Perhaps. I should hope so."

The conversation veered back to Ginny's job at the Daily Prophet, describing Beth Menzies, who she usually stayed with during the breaks, to avoid standing by herself like a loser, and having a go at Angeline with very colourful language. Talking about Beth, who was

close to a friend now, brought Ginny's talking back around to her Hogwarts friends...

"-and I haven't seen Alden in a while, so I was hoping that maybe I could invite him somewhere for lunch or something, and Pippa as well... I could invite Grace as well, and maybe Sc-"

She stopped.

"Scott," she finished quietly.

She hadn't spoken to Scott since the Hogwarts Graduation Ball... when he had told her that he could never be friend... when he had said that it was impossible to be friends with someone he was in love with. She sighed.

Tom didn't say anything. He didn't have to. Not only had Scott been the main object of his jealousy when Tom had first met her, but in his envy when Tom finally won her in place of Scott, the Ravenclaw (not a Ravenclaw anymore, Ginny reminded herself) had indirectly sent Tom to prison for something that wasn't his fault.

Needless to say, they weren't terribly close.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, looking down. "Great way to ruin a nice lunch. Way to go, Ginny."

"It's fine," Tom said, finishing his last piece of chicken, and then adding cautiously, "How's... Terby?"

"Hm." Ginny bit her lip. "Haven't talked to him since school either... he doesn't think that we should be together."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"Hey," she complained. "Be nice. I'll have you know that his reason for disagreeing with our, er, engaged-ness – is not because of him fancying me, thank you very much." She rested her hands on her hips. "Even though it's probably helped by that as well." She chuckled with little humour. "It's..." she tore her eyes away again, looking at her

hands. She had tried to avoid thinking about what he had said to her last.

Bernard seemed to ignore everything that she'd said. He stared down at her, his eyes like emeralds. His expression softened slightly, before hardening again, and he said sharply, "This is a death-wish."

Tom waited for her to continue, but when she didn't, he pushed his chair back with only the slightest squeak of wood against floorboards, and moved across to beside her, looking down at her with a quiet anxiety in the back of his expression.

She stood up, looking at her fingers entwined with his, and then leaned her forehead against his shoulder with a short sigh. "Nothing."

"It's not nothing," he replied, and took her over to the sofa, sitting her down, then sitting beside her. "What's wrong? What did Terby do?"

"He didn't do anything," Ginny said, shifting uncomfortably. "It's just..." she tried to work out how to say the next sentence, but couldn't think of to make it sound less... ridiculous. She gave it a shot anyway. "I... I accidentally saw into the future."

Tom stared at her.

"I know, I know, it seems stupid, but I just see these weird things... and then, a while later, they actually happen..." she bit her lip again. "I saw Vander dying. I saw me falling in love with you. And... and I saw when you accidentally attacked me."

Still, Tom said nothing, but his expression hardened.

"The point is, that Bernard found out about me seeing into the future... and according to him, having it happen more than once classifies me as an 'abnormality' to the Ministry, and that... that they'll send Aurors to kill me when they find out." She cringed. "And he says that your... problem – is also an abnormality. And he says that having two 'abnormalities' together makes the possibility of being discovered much stronger."

Now, finally Tom spoke. "How did he know about me?" His expression was one of polite interest, but his voice was tight and a few hundred degrees colder than it had been a moment ago.

"Er. He can kind of see into people's heads."

Tom glared. "Surely that classifies him as the abnormality?" he demanded.

"Yeah, that's what I said." Ginny rolled her hazel eyes. "He just said that it was different for him, because he was keeping it secret... and that I wasn't; that I was publicising it by being with you."

"He," Tom said very firmly, taking the side of her face in his hand, "is an idiot." He touched his lips to her forehead. "Also, we know for a fact that he has feelings for you, and there's no saying what insanities he would invent in an attempt to break us up." He kissed her nose.

"I know – that's what I said to him." Ginny sighed. "That's why I didn't bother telling you. It's stupid." She raked a hand backwards through her untidy scarlet hair. "I just... when he found out that I was going to... marry you... he was really angry. And he told me that it was a death-wish."

Her fiancé raised one eyebrow. "Anything that he says to upset you – now that is a death-wish." He kissed her lightly. "Don't let him upset you." He kissed her again – not quite so lightly. She kissed him back – definitely not something that could be called light.

She pushed her face harder into his hand, twisting her fingers into his wavy hair to pull him closer – closer – tangling her mouth with his – crushing his lips repeatedly to hers – pinning her to the seat of the sofa – one of his hands at the back of her neck, the other still holding her face-

A sigh as his lips traced down her jaw-line - her hands at his waist – his shirt slightly riding up – the cool skin of his stomach pressed against hers – all rational thought totally gone – her mouth at his temple, his at her collarbone – biting down, a sharp pain that somehow wasn't painful – her shirt come un-tucked, his hands slowly

slipping further up underneath, his fingers dancing across her hot skin - heavy breathing - his lips – his hands – ow.

Ginny shifted slightly, things being spoiled by the fact that Tom's elbow was digging into her.

She closed her eyes again, holding him tight, pushing her hands through his hair, his laboured breathing fanning warmly across her throat – ow.

His stupid elbow was really annoying her now.

She tried to move so that was more comfortable, but it wasn't really working. She then tried just to ignore it... that didn't work either... and then realisation flashed through her, and she snapped her eyes open.

It wasn't his elbow.

Ginny's eyes widened slightly, but she ignored it... ignored the childish urge to giggle... don't laugh... she was really uncomfortable though... she shifted slightly... a giggle burst out of her against Tom's forehead.

"Hm?" Tom mumbled, frowning slightly as he pulled away. "What?" His heavy-lidded eyes were still following the contours of her lips.

"Nothing." She bit her lower lip. "I'm fine." She took a deep breath, lifting her face up to his, but giggled again like a retard before she even reached him, and flopped back down onto the cushion under her. "Sorry." She struggled to stop laughing, but it was coming out in hysterical bursts that she couldn't stop.

"What?"

Ginny twisted her mouth sideways in a guilty embarrassment. She looked up at the ceiling, because if she looked at him, then she'd probably die laughing. All that she said was: "Um."

There was a pause as Tom tried to understand; Ginny didn't look down at him, so that she wouldn't start snickering again... she was just getting her laughter under control... and then-

"Crap," he gasped, rolling off her, and he walked away very quickly, but not swiftly enough for her to miss how scarlet his face was.

Still trying not laugh, Ginny eased herself into a sitting position, pushing some of her messed-up hair out of her face and straightening her knee-length fifties' skirt.

Well, that was awkward.

She mentally slapped herself for being so immature. She had the mental age of a ten-year-old. She supposed to be nearly nineteen, not nine. "Sorry," she called.

"Er. It's, er, fine," Tom said, his voice slightly strangled. He was only a few steps behind her, but refusing to show his face. She spared him the embarrassment of contradicting his plan and turning around; she just sat there. A minute later, he came and sat back beside her, his face quite coloured, his back very stiff.

She noticed that he kept his hands in his lap.

The urge to start giggling again overcame her powerfully, but she forced it down.

"Sorry," she repeated. "I'm such a social retard."

"No, it's okay," Tom said, voice still weird. "I mean, I just, er..." His sentence trailed off. He never bothered to finish it. Instead, he cleared his throat with a small cough.

She couldn't help but wonder what unwieldy sentence he had originally planned to come out with.

"Yeah." Ginny scratched the back of her neck. "Look, I'm not stupid. I know all that awkward stuff that, at the time, you really don't want to hear. But I was being childish, and I'm sorry for that."

Tom let out a long breath. "Yes," he agreed, swallowing. "Er." He pushed a hand through his hair, which drew Ginny's attention to the fact that it was all sticking up untidily at odd angles, instead of lying flat, combed neatly to one side, as it always was. She grinned guiltily. "I suppose we are getting married..."

"Really?" Ginny's eyes widened. "No kidding!"

"Shut up," he mumbled, but he reached out to put his arm around her and hug her to his side. With a happy sigh, Ginny snuggled her cheek into his shoulder, curling her legs up beneath her. The awkward moments, the tears, the tantrums – and this made it all so worth it.

xxx

A/N: HAHA. I love that. Teehee. And yeah, I know that people are going to be like, 'oh, that was kind of immature, they're like eighteen and nineteen', and it was sort of, if they were normal. XD That sounds mean. What I mean is that considering that Tom was nearly eighteen before he even kissed anyone, and that Ginny never really had a proper boyfriend beyond the likes of when she was fourteen and stuff... then it's not that bad. Well, I thought that this chapter was funny. Please review!

Remember when I said during the posting of Backtrack that I was having a go at some smut? This is it. Hah, I'm so crappy.

Chapter Four: Little Sycophant

Tom let out a long breath. “Yes,” he agreed, swallowing. “Er.” He pushed a hand through his hair, which drew Ginny’s attention to the fact that it was all sticking up untidily at odd angles, instead of lying flat, combed neatly to one side, as it always was. She grinned guiltily “I suppose we are getting married...”

“Really?” Ginny’s eyes widened. “No kidding!”

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xxx

Grace went off to medical school soon after that, which wasn’t too entertaining for Ginny, who was staying at her house, but she sometimes went to see Tom, or Philippa, or Alden, and sometimes she just stayed behind to play with Leah, or to hang out with Jacob.

Leah was easy to please. Mainly Ginny pushed the five-year-old on her swing, or sat with her, colouring clumsily over the lines of cartoon-books with fat crayons.

Jacob taught Ginny how to play poker, except with mini salted pretzels instead of money. She was terrible at it, but he sometimes let her win, and he always let her eat both of their shares of pretzels afterwards.

The weekend of her first week there, Grace came back home, with only the warning of:

Coming home on Friday! Loads to tell you! Can’t wait!

Love, Grace xxxxx!

There were a lot of exclamation marks – Grace was clearly absolutely about something, with a lot of news. This was never good, as Grace’s

lung capacity was incredible, and she could easily talk for three whole minutes without drawing a single breath. The standing record of how long she had talked was currently four hours and twenty-seven minutes, and Ginny had a worried feeling that it was soon to be broken.

“Ginny!” Grace squealed the instant she arrived, dumping her suitcases carelessly. One burst open, scattering shoes and T-shirts across the floor. “Ohmigod, ohmigod! I have so much to tell you!”

“Okay, hang on a second, say hi to your family first,” Ginny said weakly.

“Hi mum hi dad hi Jake hi Leah.” Grace whirled back to the redhead.

“Properly.”

Grace heaved a sigh, and hugged each one of them in turn, saying hello. Then the two girls went up to Grace’s bedroom, Levitating the suitcases in front of them. The brunette was strangely silent.

Maybe it was all a cover to hide the fact that something’s gone horribly wrong... maybe she’s pregnant or something.

Ginny sneaked a glance at her friend’s stomach. Nothing there that she could see.

Maybe not.

They ditched the suitcases, and Ginny sat cross-legged on the floor, looking up expectantly at Grace. “Well?”

And then the brunette exploded.

“Ohmigod, it’s great! There are loads of apartments on campus, and they’re not too expensive and the landlord of the one I’ve got my eye on is really nice and pretty hot as well but he’s married just like you’re going to be and he let me have the keys to the apartment before the contract has even been finished and it comes with a guest room so you could stay over if you ever wanted to and it has a really nice sofa

and I don't usually like sofas that much anyway but it's a really nice sofa and I want to see if I can buy a cat! I don't know if they'll let me, though. Oh well, you know that saying, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again, or something like that, well I can just buy the cat and then it'll be too late to tell that I can't – OOH!" she suddenly shrieked. "I nearly forgot!"

"What?" asked Ginny wearily, whose ears were ringing.

She drew in a big breath, ready to babble again. "Guess who's in my psychology class?" Grace squealed.

"Who?" Ginny asked wearily, wondering what could possibly have her so excited.

"Luke Glasscoe!" Grace clapped her hands together. "Remember? From that party last year, where you made friends with him, and I planned out your whole life-story, and then you passed out? Remember?"

Ginny's eyes widened. "Really? I thought he wanted to be an actor, though."

"Oh, I dunno, but he's at the medical school and he recognised me and he's really nice because I fell over loads and I stabbed him with a syringe when we were doing this experiment on stuff in people's blood and I accidentally took out a lot more blood than I was supposed to and he nearly fainted and I had to take him to the nurse and then he was in recuperation and he missed a few classes but he was still really nice about it and he helps me, and I get lost sometimes because the campus is huge and he's a junior so he's already been there three years and he knows his way around, and he remembers you! Honestly, he does and he asks how you are! And he says hi!"

After this, Grace had to sit down, having said this all very quickly and without breathing.

Ginny grinned. She'd missed Grace. "Tell him..." she thought carefully about this. She took a deep breath, and then smiled honestly. "Tell him that everything worked out."

Grace didn't add many details to what she'd been getting up to with Luke, but Ginny could vividly remember the first thing that he'd said about her: I like her. She's cool. He hadn't given a damn for how insane she was.

For some reason, it was extremely easy to picture a tall, clumsy ginger-haired child with bright blue eyes.

Ginny hoped that it would all be okay.

xxx

"Hey," she said, sitting down at lunch beside Beth, a tuna sandwich in hand. "How are you?"

"Puh-retty good," Beth hummed, shaking a can of Butterbeer Ice before cracking it open. "Lovin' life." She took a long drink from the can, gave a small burp, blinked at her own rudeness, and then sat her drink back down on the small table without apology. "How 'bout you?"

"Alright." Ginny pulled a face. "Angeline isn't happy with any of the articles that anyone's making, and it's poor old me who has to run backwards and forwards with my arms overflowing with papers between offices." She shuddered exaggeratedly, and took a large bite from her sandwich.

It was then that she noticed that there was someone else sitting quietly at their table.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I'm sorry; I didn't see you." She gave the woman a big smile. "Hi! I'm Ginny."

The woman looked to be quite tall from how high above the lunch-table she was, and slender. Her blonde hair was long, shiny and straight, falling in sheets past her shoulders, and it didn't escape

Ginny that she used it as a shield between her and other people, even more so than she hid behind her thick-rimmed, rectangular glasses. "Louise," she said softly in reply, glancing up with shy blue eyes for only a second before her eyes flashed down to her lap, where there was a large book sat.

"So, Louise – was it Louise? Sorry, I have the memory span of a fish. A dead fish – what do you think of Angeline?"

Louise's gaze flickered to Ginny's face, away from it, and then down at her book. She didn't answer.

"Well, I, personally, think that she is just about the most-"

"Oh, this should be good," said a cool voice from behind Ginny. "Do go on."

Ginny jumped, and turned to face Angeline, face reddening. "-wonderful person that I've met," she finished. "Oh." She cringed. "I must sound like such a sycophant now."

Beth snorted, but muffled the noise by taking a large slurp of coffee at the same time.

"Don't worry," Angeline said, "that opinion is unanimously mirrored." She gave Ginny a long, cold look, her sarcasm letting the redhead know that she was fully aware that she knew that 'the most wonderful person that I've ever met' was not the intended end of the sentence.

"Was there something that you wanted?" Beth asked, her voice polite but aloof.

"Do I need a reason to talk to my best friends?" Angeline laughed, the sound splashing like an angel's fountain and filling the air, so perfect without even trying. "I merely wanted to say good morning."

"Good morning," Beth and Ginny chorused back, smiling sweetly.

Angeline's sharp brown eyes flashed sideways to the blonde at the table. "Louise?"

Louise's face suddenly flared with colour, turning pink faster than Ginny would have ever believed possible. "Hello," she mumbled quickly, and then, gathering up her book and her half-eaten lunch: "Have a nice day." She left the lunch-room very rapidly.

Ginny blinked.

"She's shy," said Beth explanatorily.

"No kidding..."

A manicured hand slapped its palm down onto the table, attracting the attention of Ginny and Beth back to their boss. Angeline straightened up, sweeping her large, loose curls over one shoulder. "I had another reason for visiting you on this glorious day," she said smoothly. "In two weeks time, as I'm sure you're already aware, it is none other than my birthday."

"Let me guess," said Beth, rolling her eyes. "You want chocolates, roses and presents?"

"How kind of you!" Angeline smiled, the twist of her lips lethal. "Important as my gifts are, I'm informing you of this due to the fact that on that Saturday, I will be hosting a party in the lobby and ballroom of the Crown and Wand Hotel, on Harlow Street. All of the Prophet is invited – plus one guest, if you so wish." She twined one chocolate-coloured curl around her finger. "That's all for now – I'll see you there." She threw a triumphant look at Beth, and added, "With chocolates, roses and presents."

"Careful!" Ginny called after the brunette as she sashayed away. "Some of the roses might have thorns!" Angeline didn't answer. "More like all of them," Ginny muttered. "Sharpened thorns. Venom-coated thorns." She rested her hand on her brow.

"Are you going to invite anyone?" Beth asked.

"Yeah, probably." She lifted up her left hand. "My fiancé."

Beth's eyes widened. "You're engaged?"

The redhead held up her left hand in response, showing the gold ring that decorated her finger.

"Whoa." She swallowed down a huge piece of her sandwich and shook her head. "You're only eighteen."

"Nearly nineteen," Ginny felt that she needed to point out. "Only a few weeks left."

"So? Nineteen is hardly any better." Beth shook her head. "No offence, but you're insane."

"I've been going out with him from a year and a half." As this fact could somehow make up for how young they both were. "And I love him. Which helps."

"Whatever you say." Beth stuffed the last part of her sandwich into her mouth. "I still say you're insane, though. You're throwing away the best part of your life."

"I'm not throwing it away," Ginny protested. "I'm making it better."

"You say that now." Beth raised her eyebrows. "Something always goes wrong, trust me – and if you're married, you can't back out. You're stuck like this-" she crossed her fingers tightly "-and that pretty ring on your finger will become the pretty noose around your neck."

"Geez, it's nice to have everyone so supportive." Ginny was more than a little annoyed. So far no-one that she'd told had been happy for her decision, with the exception of Philippa Decrow, who had just about exploded with pride.

Beth shrugged, holding her hands up in a so-sue-me gesture. "Just being honest."

Ginny grumbled. "I hate honesty."

xxx

A/N: YAY! Luke Glasscoe is back! I really liked Luke... so he's back in the fic, and he will be of some relative importance. And I might make him even more important if I have any more random plot bunnies (which have annoyingly stopped breeding, so I'm stuck), so WATCH OUT.

Sorry that this was kind of a boring chapter. But it sort of matters. Because it tells us that A) Luke is back, B) Luke and Grace are 'friends', C) Queen Angeline of the Mean is throwing a partayyy, and D) no-one really approves of the idea of Tom and Ginny getting married. Aw.

Please review! :D

I WATCHED QUANTUM OF SOLACE YESTERDAY! It was absolutely amazing! I kid you not. I loved it so much that I actually did a one-shot about it, as those of you who have me on author alert will know... Ohmigod, it's such a great film. What other film has fourteen Aston Martins destroyed, twenty villains killed, one civilian killed, one person kidnapped – in the first three minutes!?! It's fantastic. I really want to go and see it again, but that would kind of be a waste of money... but ARGH, it's so good. I'm now going into a huge James Bond obsessive phase.

Chapter Five: Shiny Things

“Important as my gifts are, I’m informing you of this due to the fact that on that Saturday, I will be hosting a party in the lobby and ballroom of the Crown and Wand Hotel, on Harlow Street. All of the Prophet is invited – plus one guest, if you so wish.”

“You say that now.” Beth raised her eyebrows. “Something always goes wrong, trust me – and if you’re married, you can’t back out. You’re stuck like this-” she crossed her fingers tightly “-and that pretty ring on your finger will become the pretty noose around your neck.”

xxx

At approximately one o’clock in the afternoon in a shopping centre near Liverpool Street, in London (they had to meet in a Muggle place, as Luke Glasscoe would be joining them, and he was a Muggle), Ginny was deafened by a loud shriek.

“Ohmigod!”

Grace danced up and down like a hyperactive toddler on caffeine, clapping her hands together in delight, thus catching the attention of many startled shoppers nearby, including an old woman who grumbled, kids these days and shook her walking-stick at them.

“What?” Ginny asked wearily, not sure that she wanted to know.

“I can see Luke!” she squealed. “Oh, it’s going to be amazing! You and me and Pippa and Alden and Luke all over again, just like last time – except,” she added, pointing an accusatory finger at Ginny, “don’t pass out due to malnutrition this time.”

“Hey,” Ginny complained, affronted, but she was given a distraction in the form of a tall, slim ginger-haired man with a slightly arrogant grin on his face.

“Don’t I know you from somewhere?” he asked teasingly.

“Vaguely,” she replied, smiling back at him. “Hi, Luke.”

"I never thought I'd see you again, my little ginger friend," he said, ruffling her hair, the hue that they shared, though hers was quite more vivid. "You just collapsed and then disappeared."

Grace had grinned at the mention of Ginny's collapse, gleeful at this follow-on from her passing out due to malnutrition comment, but a guilty expression followed when he said 'disappeared'. As Luke was a Muggle, he was totally oblivious to the wonders of Apparation – as far as he knew, they had simply run away very quickly from him when he went to call a taxi.

"So how are you?" Luke asked of Ginny as they set off to find somewhere to eat, once Philippa and Alden had arrived and been greeted with hugs and chatter.

"Grace was supposed to answer that question," she accused, glancing over her shoulder at her friend.

"You trusted her to remember?" he said incredulously.

"You seem to know her quite well already." She nudged him with her elbow. "Eh?" She had only known Luke for a few hours before now, but they had got on very well – this was helped by the fact that he noticed that she had been sad from not even knowing her name or who she was.

Luke kicked a nearby stone, scuffing the toe of his shoe. "Maybe."

"Sad?"

"Alas, we always seem to end up interpreting each others woes," he said dramatically. "There must be something wrong with us. Or perhaps we're all dotted under some great writer's pen, intent on a tragedy."

Ginny's eyebrows lifted incredulously.

"I found a pub!" Philippa called from a few feet ahead, and they trailed into a nearby bar-and-restaurant, taking a seat around a slightly too-small wooden table.

"That was poetic," Ginny commented on Luke's dramatic speech as she sat down, looking over the table at him. "Which reminds me – when I met you, you were fantasising about being an actor... and now you're at medical school?"

"I heard that Grace was going there," he said casually. "I decided that the best way to meet you again was to stalk your friend."

"A man with a motive." She smirked. "Interesting."

Philippa waved a waitress over to their table, and begun the orders. "I'll have a Butterbeer, please-"

Grace and Ginny both burst out into spontaneous coughing fits to hide their companion's slip-up; Alden shot her a meaningful glance, while Luke merely looked confused.

"Excuse me?" said the waitress politely, frowning.

"Er." Philippa's dark cheeks flushed pink. "Sorry. ...It's a... Welsh thing." There was a loud thump – "ow!" she muttered, before following the command given by Ginny kicking her, and asked for normal Beers for everyone.

"Smooth," Grace murmured, trying to contain her grin, as Alden beside her looked very disapproving.

"Are you Welsh?" Luke asked.

The redness on Philippa's face deepened. "Ish," she said, and quickly saved herself anymore by breaking eye contact and turning to talk to Alden and Grace.

"Anyway," Ginny said, drawing out the word like bubblegum, "moving on... seriously. Why did you give up on being an actor?"

Luke shrugged lightly as though it didn't really bother him, but the troubled expression deep in the back of his eyes told otherwise. "My dad said it was stupid. He wanted me to 'do something worthwhile with my life'." He heaved a sigh, and forced a smile. "Going into medicine was my second choice, so I'm alright, really."

Drinks arrived, followed by food. As the final smears of food was being eaten from each plate, Luke turned his attention back to Ginny.

"So!" He set down his cutlery with a clank, and rested his chin on his hands. "When am I going to meet this famous... whatshisface."

"Tom," said Ginny wryly.

"Tom." Luke nodded. "I'll remember that. Tom. Tom. Nice, simple, sort of classy name. Tom. When do I get to beat him up for upsetting you last year?"

"No, Luke." The redhead rolled her eyes. "You'll meet him soon enough, I guess. He couldn't come today; he had to work. And..." she twisted her mouth sideways in a half-smile, "...he's not that sociable anyway."

"Hm. Sounds like a great person."

"He is!" she said defensively, and turned across to the others. "Time to go?"

They paid, leaving a tip for the waitress that they'd freaked out with their order of 'Welsh' Butterbeer, and made their way down the high-street. A bright but cold October sun shone down on them all, glinting off cobblestones and glaring reflections on the parked and passing vehicles.

"Is there anything particular that anyone needs to get?" Alden asked as they tried to plan where to go, as opposed to simply wandering around blindly, as they had been doing for the past ten minutes.

“Ooh, me!” Ginny bounced in the air, raising her hand. “I need to buy a ring.” She beamed around at them all and at the scattered applause that followed her exclamation.

Immediately, the five of them made their way towards a jeweller’s, inside which they found the largest supply of shiny things that they had ever seen.

“Ohmigod, shiny!” Grace squealed, dancing over to the counter and staring with wide eyes at a vast array of expensive gemstones and rocks. She would clearly be entertained for quite some time by the simple sparkly-ness of it all.

Meanwhile, Ginny weaved through the throng of her friends to find the little glass-covered tray where kept were hundreds of dazzling gold rings – one of which she had to decide to thread on Tom’s finger.

Hm.

“OH!” she gasped, stabbing her index finger furiously at the glass. “Look, look, look!”

“What?”

The others crowded around (apart from Grace, who was still being distracted by the shiny things), straining to see what had grabbed her attention.

Ginny clasped her hands together, resting her cheek on them. “It’s so pretty...” she sighed, her eyes lighting up.

Alden cleared his throat slightly. “Er... Ginny. You can’t buy him that.”

“Why not?” She frowned at him.

“Well, yeah, it’s nice, but... don’t you think that it’s a bit... girly?”

“So? It’s pretty.”

“Exactly.”

She pouted. "Maybe Tom wants a girly ring." She doubted it... but it was such a pretty piece of jewellery, and she really wanted a reason to go home with it – she didn't have enough money to buy a big gold ring for little purpose.

"How about this one?" Luke suggested, pointing over her shoulder at a thick, simple gold band.

"...But that's ugly." She rather thought that they were missing the point.

"Ugly – but manly."

"Do I have to get him a manly ring?" she complained.

"Yes," Alden pressed. "Look, Ginny, it's nice." He tilted his head slightly to the side. The fact that he had to angle his point of view to make it look attractive did not console her. "I think he'd like it."

"Alden," Philippa hissed. "Why are you making her get an ugly one?"

Grace, who had until this point still been marvelling at the glittery things at the counter, appeared amongst them with this helpful comment: "OOH! Look at that one! It's so pretty!"

Both Luke and Alden groaned. "Grace!"

The brunette looked confused as to why everyone was having a go at her for stating the obvious. She often did, but it usually just caused exasperation, not this level of annoyance.

"Just – please, Ginny – trust me on this one," Alden said calmly, taking hold of her shoulders. It was now more apparent than ever that he had grown a lot since the midget that he had been at sixteen years old, as she had to tilt her head back to look at him. "You criticise me at every opportunity about my hair, my clothes... whatever. You're right about all of that. Please believe me for once, though – get him the manly ring."

Ginny reluctantly agreed, scowling.

xxx

The night of October the eighteenth came faster than Ginny had anticipated, and seven-thirty found her standing in front of one of Grace's floor-length mirrors, examining the view and making sure that it was to her satisfaction.

She wore the same black dress that she had worn to the seventh-year Hogwarts Graduation Ball, which she found was edging towards being on the small side, but still fit fine. Her hair was loose and curling to her shoulders, as it was growing again since when she'd cut it jaw-length last Hallowe'en. She wore elbow-length gloves (which she hated, and she really, really hoped that they would go out of fashion soon), and resting against her collar-bone was the hazel nephrite necklace that Tom had given her for her eighteenth birthday.

"How do I look?" she asked of Grace, just behind her, who was also observing her.

"Absolutely stunning, my dear," chipped in a voice from the doorway as someone walked past. "I'd run off into the sunset with you any day."

"Go away, Jake," Grace yelled after her brother, not bothering to turn around to the source of the noise. "Go get some friends." Jacob didn't answer; he had long since disappeared. Grace tutted. "He's such a loser," she mumbled. Then she switched her attention back to Ginny. "Where are you meeting Romeo?"

"I am meeting Tom at his apartment," the other girl replied, stressing the name of her fiancé to put across the point that he did not have the name of a Shakespearean character.

"Ooh." Grace winked. "Make sure you actually go to the party, yeah? Don't just get caught up doing... other things."

Ginny ignored this last comment, combing the ends of her hair with her fingers instead of answering, idly watching the glitter of her

engagement in the dim evening light, thinking of the ‘manly’ ring tucked safely away in her bag for her to give to Tom when she saw him. It seemed impossible that she could have agreed to something so important, so dramatic... and that she could just keep going like nothing had changed. Still talking to her friends, having lunch, getting annoyed about work... it all seemed so normal.

“Are you going or not?”

Grace’s voice brought Ginny back from her musings, and she turned to face her friend.

“Yeah, sorry, I just went into a bit of a daydream.” She pulled an apologetic face as she grabbed her bag from the floor and slung it over her shoulder. “I’ll see you later, okay? I’ll probably be back late-ish. I don’t know when the party finishes.”

“Kay, whatever.” Grace gave her a hug, and then let go, stepping back to give her room to Apparate.

Crack.

The inside of Grace Hartwin’s bedroom blurred, and then it morphed into the sight of a large brown door that read 21-5D. She lifted her knuckles to the wood and knocked loudly three times.

There was a short pause, and then the door swung open, revealing Tom Riddle, dressed in a simple shirt, neat black trousers, and a green waistcoat, with a tidy little bowtie. He opened his mouth to greet her, but seemed to get distracted, his eyebrows rising slightly as he took in her appearance.

“Hi,” she said, pointedly reminding him that she didn’t really want to stand in the hallway and be stared at.

“Oh.” He started, recovering himself to reality. “Sorry.” He smiled sheepishly. “I just – you – you look-”

“Thanks,” she grinned, knowing what he was getting at. She lifted her eyebrows at him, or, more accurately, at his lack of shoes or a jacket. “You nearly ready?”

“Yes – just a moment.” He stepped back to allow her into the apartment and closed the door behind her. He then disappeared to the bedroom, and was slipping into a black jacket as he returned a moment later. He made to move through the apartment, but stopped, almost as though he had remembered something, and turned to her. “Beautiful,” he said. “That’s what I meant to say.”

Ginny smiled. “I guessed.”

He nodded shortly. Once he had taken his shoes from the other side of the living room, he came to stand expectantly in front of her.

“Are we ready to roll?” she asked, and then, at his confirmation, linked her arm through his, holding onto his elbow. With only a grin and a quip of, “Hold on tight – please keep your seatbelts on at all times,” to prepare him beforehand, they Apparated.

Just before they vanished, she heard, “What’s a seatbelt?”

Damn.

xxx

A/N: Haha. Ginny made an oopsie. Well, I made an oopsie today. A really BIG, EMBARRASSING oopsie. In my school we have a cloister (a big square corridor with a garden in the middle) and we’re not allowed in it before registration, but I had to go through to get to assembly because I was already late, and Mr. Scarily-Similar-To-Tom-Riddle was in there being all prefect-y and telling us little people to get out of the cloister and he tried to make us get out and my friends confused him because he didn’t know what to do if we were late for assembly so he let us through. And said that ‘my friends’ confused him and not ‘me’ because I just sort of went into brain melt-down mode and stared at him. Hehe. My bad.

Anyway. The next chapter, as you may have guessed, is about the partayyy! Yay. And Christelle Lillian Black (I hope I spelled that right. And I think that I misspelt 'spelled'. I'm confused now), sorry, I would put you in the party, but I've already written it, and I can't be bothered to write a new part in. XD Sorry!

Please review, I love you all...

Chapter Six: Funny Business

“How kind of you!” Angeline smiled, the twist of her lips lethal. “Important as my gifts are, I’m informing you of this due to the fact that on that Saturday, I will be hosting a party in the lobby and ballroom of the Crown and Wand Hotel, on Harlow Street. All of the Prophet is invited – plus one guest, if you so wish.” She twined one chocolate-coloured curl around her finger. “That’s all for now – I’ll see you there.”

“Are we ready to roll?” she asked, and then, at his confirmation, linked her arm through his, holding onto his elbow. With only a grin and a quip of, “Hold on tight – please keep your seatbelts on at all times,” to prepare him beforehand, they Apparated.

Just before they vanished, she heard, “What’s a seatbelt?”

Damn.

xxx

“No gatecrashers!”

Ginny tapped one foot impatiently. “Very funny, Beth. Now let me in.” She had been stopped at the entrance to the Crown and Wand Hotel (where Angeline’s party was being held), and was getting thoroughly annoyed by the fact that she could see chocolate cake inside, and yet was being held up outdoors.

“I’m sorry,” Beth said, smirking, “but I’m going to have to ask you to leave, before I call security.”

“Menzies.” Her voice shifted to a growl.

“Do you have an I.D pass with you?” the older woman asked sweetly, her grey eyes narrowing mischievously. It was nice to see that at least one of them was having fun.

Ginny suppressed a groan. “Beth, you evil, evil cow. You know that I dropped my I.D into the kettle – you watched it disintegrate. Just let me before I consider setting my fiancé on you.”

Tom shifted awkwardly next to her as Beth’s eyes flashed across to scrutinise and judge him – it was nothing personal, it was just what she did to everyone. She was alarmingly accurate. Apparently, her analysis of Ginny had come up with loud, not easily intimidated, protective, annoying, loyal and fun – and it was this good analysis that had resulted in their friendship.

However, thankfully, “Is this him?” was all that she said, and then, to Ginny’s confirmation, she added, “Hm.” Then she let them through, warning them not to take all of the cake.

“I am going to predict that I just met Elizabeth Menzies,” Tom said as they proceeded into a large, warm lobby.

“Yup,” Ginny chirped.

“Is she always like that?”

“Always. In fact, she’s usually worse. I told her to be on her best behaviour, if she didn’t want you to absolutely hate her.”

“That helps my opinion of her.” Tom gave her a sideways glance that was close to a smirk underneath the mask he’d set up that she was long used to. “Also... you merely threw in the ‘fiancé’ part to show off, didn’t you?”

“So what if I did?” she pouted. “I happen to like boasting how lucky I am.”

At this last comment on being ‘lucky’, Tom arched one eyebrow disbelievingly, but didn’t say anything, except, “Wine?” and nodded his head towards the refreshment table where stood little plates of olive and cheese impaled on toothpicks, champagne, and various types of expensive-looking wine.

“Sure.” As she surveyed the choice of wines, munching a piece of cheese from a toothpick (she left the olive behind. It looked dodgy), she added, “And speaking of engagement-related stuff...”

Setting the olive-and-toothpick down, she burrowed into her bag, and then re-emerged triumphant, fishing out a leather box small enough to fit into her hand. “Aha.” She paused, biting her lip. “I think I’m supposed to say something... but I’m coming up blank. So... here.” She held it out to him, blushing pink at the inadequacy of the handing-over of his ring.

Not needing to ask what it was, Tom opened the box and slipped the gold band over his ring finger. With a magical incantation on it that Alden had helped her with, it shrunk to fit him exactly. Then he leaned slightly forwards to lightly kiss the edge of her forehead, close to her temple, but drew back when she twisted to press her lips to the bottom of his jaw.

“Somehow,” he said coolly, though smirking again, “I doubt that it would be appropriate here.”

“Eh, you’re no fun.” Ginny turned back to look back at the table of refreshments, and she chose a pretty-looking golden wine, sipping some of its fruity-flavoured liquid.

As they progressed idly through the lobby, they were met by Angeline Storne striding towards them, chocolate curls gathered up in a sloppy, yet somehow elegant bun at the side, a crimson dress adhering tightly to her every curve. “Ginevra!” she exclaimed, her tone strangely warm and friendly. She stopped in front of them. “How are you, darling?” She ducked to give Ginny an air-kiss on each cheek with a loud ‘mwah’.

A bit scared by your behaviour, was the answer that the redhead longed to give, but instead said warily, “I’m fine, thanks.” She tried not to be too blatantly obvious in her suspicion. “What about you?”

“Fabulous.” She then turned her attention away from Ginny, and the reason for her kindness became immediately obvious. She faced Tom, twisting her body slightly to one side with a coy smile, twining a

long pearl necklace around her slim fingers. "And who is this gorgeous creature you've failed to introduce me to?"

Beside Ginny, Tom seemed extremely uncomfortable. It was apparent that so far he didn't like this party.

"My fiancé," said Ginny bluntly, smiling sweetly. "Tom, Angeline; Angeline, Tom."

Her boss remained smiling, but some of the amiability disappeared from it, leaving just an attractive façade. "Lovely to meet you." Angeline dipped into a low curtsy, flicking some loose strands of hair out of her face as she straightened up. "Have you not a 'happy birthday' for me, then?"

"No," Ginny replied, even though it was clear from the low, teasing tone of Angeline's voice that she was still addressing Tom. "We're just here for the cake."

Angeline flashed a sharp look at her.

"Joke." The younger woman rolled her eyes. "You know, ha-ha? Never mind." She gave her most saccharine smile. "Happy birthday."

She didn't expect Tom to say anything, and was therefore when he said coolly, "While I try to not make presumptions about people I've only just met, I feel that this occasion calls for it, and thus I wish you a happy birthday, and that the next year of your life and any number of years after it may be as judgemental, shallow-minded and prejudiced as the last."

Ginny's hazel eyes widened. Wow. Harsh much?

"You know," said Angeline coldly after a moment of merely staring at Tom in a mixture of confusion and astonishment, "I daresay that for someone accusing me of being judgemental, you seem to be quite able of judging me."

"I don't mean to be hypocritical – I just tell the truth."

Inwardly, though she kept it hidden, Ginny was on verge of squealing with delight at the sight of how Tom cut Angeline down to size with such ease. She wanted to hug him and say thank-you a million times, but she couldn't interrupt said cutting-down to do so. She satisfied herself with allowed a tiny smug smirk to appear on her lips.

Having nothing to say in retort, Angeline bit out, "Enjoy the party," in a voice tight with annoyance, and then sashayed away to bully someone else who wouldn't fight back.

"Can I just say," Ginny said in awe, eyes still wide, "that you're amazing?"

Tom looked quite pleased with himself. "Now you know how everyone felt when you made an enemy of Bastet within five minutes of being Sorted."

A heat radiated from her face in embarrassment as she recalled her vicious contradiction of Claude Felina Bastet, alleged Slytherin Queen. "True." She shrugged. "I appreciate you so much more now – even though she's probably going to make my life hell when I get back to work."

"Can I make it up to you?" He tilted his head towards the open doors on the other side of the lobby, through which came soft, pretty music from the Crown and Wand Hotel ballroom.

"Sure." She drained the remainder of her gold wine and set the empty glass down on the refreshments table; after setting her bag down in the corner, she allowed herself to be led away.

As the song presently playing snapped to a close with a flurry of violin staccatos, and another up-beat one quickly began, Tom slipped his arm from linking with hers, in favour of taking one hand and the small of her back.

The song's percussion was a blur, and they spun away, spun back in, twisting under his arm, leaning back, being caught – luckily for him, she couldn't help but think sourly, Tom had excellent balance, and didn't seem to have any trouble staying upright... unlike herself.

A crescendo in the piano called for falling backwards onto his arm (elegantly, she supposed, but that was never going to happen), and she could see immediately that she was falling too far.

“Tom!” she yelped, and, thankfully, was caught before she ended her share of the party by knocking herself out on the marble floor.

“Oh, my apologies,” he said teasingly as she crashed into his chest, clutching his shoulders to keep her standing. “I could have sworn that it was intended for me to let you collapse to the ground.”

“You,” she snapped, “are not funny.”

“On the contrary, I thought it was quite amusing.”

Ginny scowled.

“I’m sorry,” Tom amended. “Do you want to wait for a slower song?”

“Excuse me,” she said, affronted. “It’s not the song, it’s my partner that I’m having trouble with.” She stepped slightly away from him, noticing the stares that they were receiving due to her still gripping Tom. She folded her arms. “I can dance perfectly well to this song, as long as you don’t try anything ‘funny’.”

“Very well.” Tom took her hands again and continued to spin her across the room, her scarlet hair fanning out behind her. “It hasn’t escaped my notice, by the way, which particular necklace you’re wearing.”

Ginny grinned, looking down quickly to watch the glint of the hazel nephrite. “I love it. Why – do you not want me to wear it?”

“If I didn’t want you to wear it, then I wouldn’t have given it to you, would I?”

“I suppose.”

“Completely off-topic, but can I enquire as to whether all of your companions at work are as terrifying as the birthday girl and – what was her name – Menzies?”

“Terrifying?” Ginny frowned. “Are you scared of them?”

“Not in the slightest,” he replied offhandedly, twirling her in an open circle and then sliding her back the length of his arm. “Others probably would be though.”

“What, you mean me? I’m not a coward, thanks very much for implying your opinions on my courage.” She almost added, I am a Gryffindor, you know! Then she was startled at herself. She hadn’t been a Gryffindor... for a very long time.

“Certainly not you. I never said that.”

She stepped back to pirouette around him and then turn him around, reaching over his left shoulder to take his hand and spin him. “And in answer to your question – yeah, they’re all pretty scary. Well. Louise isn’t. But I don’t really know her that well.”

“Who, may I ask, is Louise?”

“Oh.” Ginny scanned the ballroom and what little of the lobby she could see through the doors as she sidestepped with Tom back and forth. “Er.” To her surprise, she found the blonde on the edge of the ballroom, not reading, not hiding, but sneaking shy glances at a handsome brown-haired man nearby. “There.”

She hadn’t really thought that Louise would come at all – the quiet, awkward girl didn’t seem like the party kind of person – let alone venture into the ballroom. And Ginny was very interested in the anonymous male who was attracting so much of her colleague’s attention.

“Which one?” Tom asked, his hushed voice clicking her attention back to their conversation.

“The blonde one, by the big round window. In a pink dress.”

“I mean her no offence, but she looks rather too quiet to be your friend,” Tom said, and Ginny knew what he meant – the majority of her companions were as loud, clumsy and inconsiderate as she was.

“You’re quiet,” she pointed out.

He nodded. “Touché.”

The fast song to which Ginny and Tom danced was slowing as it finished, and she excused herself quickly, desperate to talk to Beth and demand who it was that Louise was so interested in.

“Menzies!” she hissed, dragging her friend aside. “Urgent business.”

“What?” the brunette grumbled, casting a longing glance back at the cluster of people she had been telling jokes to.

“Look at this!” Ginny led Beth to the ballroom and peered through, stabbing a finger in the direction of a pink-faced Louise who was quite avidly staring at her feet now that the brown-haired man was talking to her.

“Ohmigod,” whispered Beth. “That’s Will Gallantree!” She sucked in a gasp, and hurriedly explained, “He works in crime journalism, so he hardly ever comes down to our floor – he just broke up with his girlfriend a few weeks ago, according to Edith – you know Edith, she does Angeline’s letters – Edith knows everything, it’s scary.” Beth rushed out her breath. “I’ve never seen Louise this embarrassed. She must really like him.”

Both of the girls turned to grin at each other.

Ten minutes later, Louise had been told that a ‘friend’ wanted to dance with her, Will had been told a ‘friend’ wanted to dance with him, Louise had been abducted of her glasses so that everyone could see her astoundingly blue eyes – and the two met.

More colour flowed into Louise's face than Ginny ever thought could be humanly possible (and she was a redhead!), and for a second, Beth and Ginny were frightened that their friend was just going to run away... but they timidly started to dance.

"Yes!" The two match-makers slapped ecstatic high-fives. "Oh, we are good."

Letting Beth return to her previous conversation, Ginny set off to find Tom. She located him by the wine table where she'd given him his engagement ring, swirling dark red wine idly around his glass.

"Hi," she said cheerfully. "Sorry about that. I just had to set up Louise and Will Gallantree."

"Are you sure they wanted to be set up?"

"No. But it's fun!"

"Not for them, probably."

She gave him a curious look as to why he was so adamantly against match-making other people.

"...Fionn once tried to set me up with one of her friends in my fourth-year," he muttered.

Ginny's eyebrows rose. "Wow." She grimaced, and patted his shoulder consolingly. "I feel your pain."

Irritably, Tom replied, "You can't possibly 'feel my pain' until you've spent two weeks with Lydia Corgan stalking you with boxes of heart-shaped chocolates – probably poisoned with Love Potions, no less."

She stifled her laughter. "I wouldn't mind someone following me if they had chocolate," she said thoughtfully.

"That's you, though. I don't like chocolate."

"You sick, twisted person." Ginny shook her head. Not like chocolate? It was insane. It was just... just wrong on so many levels.

She turned to take another gold wine from the refreshments table, drinking a large quantity of it and watching it magically fill up again. She drank a bit more, enjoying watching the magic at work, even if the wine was giving her a headache. She was easily amused.

Tom sipped some of his own wine, and then totally changed the topic, saying out-of-the-blue, "I realise now that I've never actually taken you out anywhere."

Surprised, she looked up at him. "Yes, you have." She shifted her wine-glass to her other hand so that she could tick off her fingers. "Yule Ball two years ago – even though, technically, I went with Alden. But I danced with you all night. You took me out loads last summer. Hallowe'en barbeque last year. And then you took me out for lunch to Giovanni's or what's-his-face only, like, a week ago. And this party."

The dark-haired nineteen-year-old gave her a withering look. "A school ball and a school barbeque hardly count as taking you out. Last summer – that was just lunches or going to that stupid circus thing-

"I liked that stupid circus thing," said Ginny happily.

"-and this party... I don't know." He tipped his head to one side contemplatively. "I mean, taking you out properly; for dinner, with no-one else."

"Oh." Ginny racked her brain. "No, you haven't."

"Well, I will. Don't make plans for your birthday - I'll take you out somewhere." He lifted her hand to his lips. "I promise."

xxx

A/N: -GASP- Tom doesn't like chocolate! It's horrible. It's just... just awful. Yeah, I couldn't really think of a good way to end this chapter,

so I just sort of let it... stop. I'm really excited... there's a good bit coming up, yay yay yay!

In reply to Morning-Sunset, no, I think he does not have a little crush on me, because that's stupid. Because I didn't get him flustered – my friends confused him. Difference. Lol. I wish. Anyway, he's really polite. Yes, Grace is going to a Muggle medical university. That's where she met Luke.

Please review, people!

Chapter Seven: Of Being Snooped Upon

Tom sipped some of his own wine, and then totally changed the topic, saying out-of-the-blue, “I realise now that I’ve never actually taken you out anywhere.”

“Oh.” Ginny racked her brain. “No, you haven’t.”

“Well, I will. Don’t make plans for your birthday - I’ll take you out somewhere.” He lifted her hand to his lips. “I promise.”

xxx

Papers crumpled underneath Ginny, but she didn’t really care. It was the last day in the Daily Prophet office before the autumn holidays – one last newspaper to print, and then they handed over the tasks to the other office near Birmingham, who took over briefly – and so it didn’t matter much if a few articles were torn as she sat on them.

“Now, Louise – spill,” Beth commanded, sitting on an up-turned bin. They had invaded the blonde’s little cubicle to chat, as Angeline was in a board-meeting and wasn’t able to tell them off. “How long have you been hopelessly in love with a certain Señor William Gallantree?”

Immediately after she heard his name, Louise flushed pink. “I’m not hopelessly in love with him,” she said softly, pulling at some of her hair to hide her face – her instinctive defence. “I just...” Wisely, she chose not to finish this sentence.

“Aw, you have no reason not to,” said Beth. “He’s good-looking, he’s nice, he has a sense of humour – even if his jokes are crapsville, to be honest – and he is now officially single.”

“And he looked like he was having a good time when he danced with you,” Ginny chimed in.

“I think he really likes you,” Beth insisted.

However, at that precise moment, who but Will Gallantree chose to stride through the office towards Angeline’s office, a handful of

photograph prints tucked under one arm. Beth and Ginny both craned their short necks to see what he was doing, and though Louise was tall enough to see without struggling, she stared at the ground.

He pushed the prints, as well as a few envelopes, under Angeline's door once he saw that she was not inside her office. Then he stood up straight, dusting his hands off on his trousers.

Louise looked up now, watching silently through her shield of golden hair in time to see him glance through the office before continuing back the way he had come.

Ginny and Beth flashed an anxious look at each other.

"Oh, yes," Louise said, fighting to keep the unhappy tone from her sweet, quiet voice. "He really likes me. He looked right through me." She sighed. "Excuse me." Swallowing hard, she grabbed some papers from her desk – including the ones that Ginny was sitting on.

Oops.

When Louise found a lot of them to be crumpled or ripped from a certain young redhead sitting on them, she tossed them back down onto the neat surface of her desk, and then moved swiftly from her cubicle.

Beth winced. "Ouch. That's gotta hurt." She stretched her small arms slightly. "Oh well. Come on, Peregrine. We've got work to do."

As Ginny sometimes referred to Beth as Menzies, Ginny was more often than not called Peregrine, and once, she was even called 'Perrie'. Nonetheless, the redhead followed the older woman down the hallway back to the little station where other people left them letters to sort and deliver to right cubicles.

"Speaking of attractive people, by the way, I have to admit that your fiancé isn't half-bad," Beth complimented. "He is pretty tasty."

"Hands off."

“No fear; he’s not my type.”

Ginny threw a grin at her friend, but then a distraction came in the form of a small, dumpy man with spectacles who said in an alarmingly high-pitched voice, “Miss Peregrine?”

“C’est moi.” She turned to the man, who was about the same size as she was, which she had to cringe at. It must be embarrassing, as the man was about thirty-five, and he was tiny. Ginny, at least, was only eighteen, and still had a small hope of getting taller. “What’s up?”

“Mr. Storne wants to see you.”

The man pushed his round glasses further up his snub nose, and then scuttled away. Ginny blinked after him.

“Er.”

She looked over at Beth, but the only help that the brunette offered was a jaunty wink, and a ‘good luck’.

“Okay, then.” She waved a bewildered farewell, and then went up the stairs to the top floor, where Edward Storne’s penthouse was. There were two doors – one to his living-quarters, one to his office.

Make sure you get the right door, she thought, grimacing, and opened one.

Thankfully, it was indeed the door to his office, and she slipped through to find herself in a small reception with lots of squashy armchairs. A woman of about thirty, standing behind the front desk, pointed her wand at the door on the other side of the reception, and it swung open. “Go straight in.”

“Thanks,” Ginny mumbled, nervously slipping through it.

Behind a large desk sat a man from whom it was apparent Angeline’s striking appearance had come from. He was tall (as was obvious by the huge desk in front of him), and his face was one that any sculptor would have died to give to their chiselled angels. His hair was thick

and curly, though grey, and his deep eyes were lively, even though he was closer to sixty than fifty.

“Miss Peregrine?” he verified her identity.

“Yeah,” she replied, hastily adding a ‘sir’ on the end for respect. She hoped that her floundering wasn’t too apparent.

“Take a seat.”

Oh no. I really like it here... I don’t want to get fired...

She did as told, fiddling with her hands in her lap, biting her lip as she peered through her lowered eyelashes at the Head of the Daily Prophet. “Is there something you wanted, sir?” This time she remembered the ‘sir’.

“Yes. As I do with all new employees, I did a bit of snooping about your character.” He guiltily bared a dazzling smile. “I’ve been asking the others what they think of you, and I’ve been most pleased to receive an excellent report from everyone that knows you – there were a few exceptions, evidently.”

He ticked a few names off his list, and examples of how she clearly wouldn’t know people on the higher floors. Ginny was fairly certain that he didn’t mean to be patronising, but it was turning out that way, and she tried not to get annoyed.

“However,” Storne continued, forming a steeple with his fingers and examining the little tower that his hands made, “the point is that you are, from what I hear, a hard-worker – determined – and have a strong personality.”

Ginny couldn’t help but muse that he must have definitely failed to interview his own daughter. Angeline, she was sure, would have quite a lot to say about her strong personality.

“Therefore, I was just wondering if you would be able to accept an occupation of more significance than the one you currently hold,

though it would take up more of your time, of course,” Storne explained, eyeing her carefully for her reaction.

Amazed, Ginny’s mouth fell slightly open. “Am – am I getting a promotion?”

“In short, yes.” Storne shrugged. “That is, if you choose to take it.”

“Well – I – yeah – of course! Thanks – I – yeah, I’d love to do it!” She beamed, and only then thought to ask, “What is the job?” If it was something like cleaning toilets or the coffee pot or something, then she’d feel like a total idiot.

“Oh, you would be helping with the organisation of interviews. Angeline, or myself, or someone else, would let you know either the precise person, or the type of person, that they wanted an exclusive interview with, and you would book it... or set it up... or whatever it was that you needed to do to get it.”

And I thought that I was getting fired!

Realisation dawned at her, recalling Beth’s wink and sing-song ‘good luck’.

She knew! She had me really worried, and she knew that I was getting promoted! That horrible-

“Will you take it?” Mr. Storne asked of her.

“Oh, yeah, I will. Thanks so much!” Ginny grinned at him, fighting to urge to bounce in her chair and clap her hands together like a small child.

“On the Monday after the holidays, report to Angeline,” was her boss’ final comment, before he bid her a good holiday, and sent her out.

I got a promoooootion, I got a promoooootion, not a demoooootion, I’m in moooootion, with mah promoooootion, she sang in her head as she skipped down the stairs from the penthouse.

As she entered her level of the office, she was greeted by yells of “CONGRATULATIONS!” – loudest from Beth, quietly from Louise, and half-heartedly from some people who she didn’t really know that well. Ginny noticed that Angeline was skulking in her office, clearly not happy with this transition.

“You got a promotion – come on. We’re going out to celebrate!” Beth crowed as the rest of the crowd trailed away to collect up their things and go home.

“We were going out to celebrate anyway,” Ginny pointed out wearily, but she didn’t argue. She headed to the coat racks beside her old ‘office’ – the refreshments room with the coffee pots and the teabags – to grab her bag and her bomber jacket, and then met Beth and Louise by the stairs.

“Where are we going?” Louise asked quietly.

“Don’t ask me,” Ginny held up her hands in a surrender gesture. “I’m being dragged along, too.” She grinned at the blonde, but only received a faint smile in response.

The three young women moved to the special Apparation area in the lobby, and all held onto Beth, for no-one else had the slightest clue where they were going.

Crack.

A moment later, they appeared around the back of a Muggle pizza restaurant.

“Wow, Menzies,” Ginny said sarcastically, rolling her hazel eyes. How had she not seen this coming? Celebratory dinner – yeah. Right. “You’re really overindulging us, aren’t you?”

“Yup.”

At the table, before the pizzas arrived, Beth and Louise suddenly pulled from their bags small gifts – Louise’s, wrapped very neatly; Beth’s, in a paper bag.

“Oh!” Ginny exclaimed, taking the presents into her arms as they were thrust at her. “Er – thank you?”

“Well, we probably won’t see you in the holidays before your birthday, so I said that we should give them to you today,” Beth explained. “Open them! No – open mine first.”

Louise made no protest to this outburst, and merely watched as Ginny upturned the paper bag marked ‘PEREGRINE’ in big black letters, and tipped its contents into her hand. From within it fell a tube of bright green lipstick.

Ginny stared at it, confused, while Beth hooted with laughter.

“Don’t look so frightened,” Beth teased. “It’s just lipstick.” She explained, “You have so many colourful eyeliners that I thought you would need something to set it all off.”

Suspiciously, Ginny pulled off the lid and twisted the green make-up upwards, scrutinising it for anything poisonous. “Interesting.” She raised her eyebrows. “Well, thank you loads, anyway!”

She reached for Louise’s present and unshelled its shiny blue wrapping, until a key-ring with a smiley-face, a peace-sign, and a flower hanging from it. Ginny prodded it with one finger, and the various symbols of peace and happiness jingled.

Well, I suppose it is the sixties’ starting, she thought wryly.

“Thanks!” she said to Louise as well, and hugged her awkwardly as the pizzas arrived on the table; the waiter gave them a weird look. “No, we’re not like that,” Ginny tried to explain to the waiter, but he was already gone. “Oh well,” she giggled.

“So what are you doing for your birthday?” Louise asked softly.

“I’m not really sure. Tom, my fiancé,” she added for Louise’s benefit, who she wasn’t sure knew about Tom, “is taking me out somewhere. That’s all I know, though.”

“Ooh-la-la,” Beth sang, nudging the redhead with her elbow and wiggling her eyebrows. “Get in there.”

“No, Menzies.” She rolled her eyes in a what-is-your-problem gesture, and then decided to solve her own problem – that of her complaining stomach – by starting on her large cheese pizza.

The conversation on their table abruptly stopped (Louise was never talkative anyway, and both Ginny and Beth were immediately lost to the glories of cheese, tomato and dough), leaving each to their own thoughts. Ginny was left reflecting on how suggestive everyone was – more so than they had ever been before, for people that she had known previously, such as Grace and Philippa, though Alden would never imply anything.

As she was now engaged to Tom, it wasn't like she'd never thought about it... it was just a subject of getting hot and flustered, so she left pondering it for whenever it actually happened.

Whenever it would happen.

xxx

A/N: Okay, so it's not that subtle a hint, is it? Well, still. You get the idea. I'm amazing at my subtlety. But not as bad as my friend, who saw Suspiciously-Tom-esque-Sixth-Former, gasped, turned to me and shrieked really loudly, “It's him!” –slap forehead- Because he wouldn't notice that, would he? ...

In answer to The-Quoi: I'm a sucker for romance – what do you think I'm going to do? LOL. Yay... next chapter... -bounce-

Also, by the way, I am thinking of getting a Youtube account so that I can do a video blog! Or a vlog! Hehe. I love that word. Yeah. So then you can see the wonderful-ness that is me. Woohoo. Or whatever.

Please review!!

Chapter Eight: Live For Tonight

"I'm not really sure. Tom, my fiancé," she added for Louise's benefit, who she wasn't sure knew about Tom, "is taking me out somewhere. That's all I know, though."

"Ooh-la-la," Beth sang, nudging the redhead with her elbow and wiggling her eyebrows. "Get in there."

"No, Menzies." She rolled her eyes in a what-is-your-problem gesture, and then decided to solve her own problem – that of her complaining stomach – by starting on her large cheese pizza. Ginny was left reflecting on how suggestive everyone was – more so than they had ever been before, for people that she had known previously, such as Grace and Philippa, though Alden would never imply anything.

As she was now engaged to Tom, it wasn't like she'd never thought about it... it was just a subject of getting hot and flustered, so she left pondering it for whenever it actually happened.

xxx

"Ooh, there's an owl here for you, Ginny!"

The now-nineteen-year-old Ginny glanced across at Grace, and then at the clock. "I don't know if I'll have time to open it... I might do."

"Owlie!" Leah shrieked helpfully from where Dorothy Hartwin was struggling to put her to bed. "Can I pat owlie, oh please, mummy?"

"You can pat the owl, yes, Leah, darling – but then you have to go beddy-byes, or it will be past bed-time and the monsters will get you!" Dorothy gasped, her eyes wide.

Leah's lower lip quivered. "Don't want the monsters to get me," she whimpered, and neglected saying hello to 'owlie' in favour of running away through the house to get into bed as soon as possible, Dorothy chasing after her.

Grace snorted. "I remember when I used to believe all that monster bullsh-"

"Language, Grace," Jacob interrupted, leaning against the doorframe. "You know how quickly Leah picks up words, and if you teach her swearwords, then you'll be in deep shit trouble from mum."

"Hypocrite," Grace muttered, turning back to Ginny. "When does Romeo arrive?"

"Now, supposedly," Ginny replied, looking at the clock again. "Oh well. If it's presents, I'm opening it." She retrieved the parcel that the owl held, shooed the owl away before it could think of attacking her, and began to tear open the brown packaging.

Grace had given her some books (which she always borrowed, so really it was like buying herself books); Jacob had tossed a few Galleons at her when he realised it was her birthday, not having anything else for her; Philippa had sent her a pale green dress that she was now wearing to go out for dinner; Alden had sent her some money and a watch (to suggest that she might actually be on time somewhere; they had met up for a few days ago and she had been twenty minutes late); other friends from school had posted her some small things.

It was found that the parcel was a present from Eleanor Fionn, the Head Girl of two years ago at Hogwarts, who Ginny had been quite close to at school. Inside was a cheerful card with a ginger cat on it, describing what Eleanor had been up to for the past year, and the gift in itself was a record for Kids In Glass Cauldrons.

"Oh, I love them!" Ginny exclaimed, hugging the record to her.

At that moment, the doorbell rang, and Ginny searched for a place to put her present, settled for just setting it down on a nearby table, and then hurried towards the door, which Grace was opening.

Ginny peered around the edge of the door as Grace exclaimed, "Hi, Romeo!" Ginny kicked her. "Tom, even," the brunette corrected. "What time can I expect my friend back?" She was prone to worrying.

He glanced at his watch. "Eleven o'clock at the latest, probably." He looked past Grace at his fiancée and the smallest of smiles twitched his lips. "Are you ready?"

"That I am- oh!" Ginny flushed pink as she realised that she was barefoot. "Shoes. Right." She scuttled back into the hallway, scanning under carpets and cupboards for where she'd kicked her shoes. She'd been wearing them earlier, but had deemed them uncomfortable and discarded them... somewhere.

Finally extracting them from the depths of the sofa, she returned to Tom and Grace only to find the latter challenging the former with ridiculous questions.

"Will there be alcohol?", for example, was what she was currently demanding.

"Grace, that's a stupid question," Ginny butted in, pushing her friend slightly out of the way.

"I'm serious, young lady!" Grace said sharply, pointing an accusatory finger at the couple in front of her, looking very much the part of an annoying little old woman. "I want to know-"

Ginny sighed. "Grace. Stop. Before you embarrass yourself."

Helpfully, Jacob put in, "Oh, don't worry. That time has come and gone – many times. Just go."

"Okay," said the redhead, realising that this was probably going to be only chance of leaving with her sanity intact. "Let's leave," she urged Tom, flinging a "BYE!" over her shoulder as they made their way down the long path through Grace's massive front garden.

The silence was almost stifling – in the Hertfordshire countryside, there was no-one around for miles, and the only sound was the occasional rustle of a rabbit in the undergrowth. The clouds above hid the majority of stars which should have been visible due to the lack of excessive artificial light, and those clouds also brought a chill that

made Ginny wish she'd brought a jacket. Instead, she stepped closer to Tom, and took his hand, hoping to steal some of his body warmth.

"Guess who I just got a parcel from?" she said in a sing-song voice, swinging his hand backwards and forwards like a small child.

"Who?"

She gave him a smirk. "Eleanor Fionn."

Tom's mouth twisted slightly with disdain. Ginny knew that towards the end of their stay together as Head Boy and Head Girl, his tolerance towards her had been upgraded from absolutely-detest to unobjectionable-as-long-as-she-doesn't-talk, but he still strongly disliked her most of the time. "What did she give you?"

"A record for Kids In Glass Cauldrons."

He considered this. "Not bad. Did you pre-warn her that all of her music taste is terrible, and she was only to get you something decent?" he asked.

"No – only you do that," she chided, "which, I may add, isn't a very nice thing to say to people. I think she just guessed what kind of thing I would like." She shrugged. "Lucky guess, then. I've been wanting this album for ages."

"Hold on," Tom said, lifting slightly the hand that she held so that she wouldn't forget or do something silly like let go just as they Apparated. It wasn't unlikely that she could do such a stupid thing, and it certainly wouldn't be the most romantic birthday dinner ever if she was Splinched and had to be taken to St. Mungoes'.

Then, in a flurry of colour that was the world shifting, they disappeared.

Where they reappeared was not in the countryside, but it was also hushed. Ginny vaguely recognised it as London, but it was near the suburbs, and the only noises were the soft hum of traffic some few hundred metres away, and someone talking in low tones in a nearby

building. Directly across from them was a small, pretty building painted red, with written on a sign the words Caramar Rosé.

The inside was gently playing Latino music that was loud enough to be heard over the chatter of the restaurant's other customers, but not so noisy as to be irritating. The interior design also looked quite Hispanic, and Ginny guessed that she was going to be served Latin food.

Tom spoke quietly to a nearby waiter, and then took Ginny's hand again, leading her through the maze of small, round tables, and then stopping beside one by a window that overlooked the restaurant's small, pretty garden. The tabletop was lit dimly by a single, fat candle, and on the seat nearest to Ginny was a yellow flower that she recognised to be identical to the primrose that had been her first flower from Tom.

"Ooh," said Ginny, but somehow her voice was too loud; some people turned to scowl at her. She lowered her voice, and whispered, "Thank you!" She pushed the primrose behind her ear, its petals brushing her temple, and then sat down.

He sat opposite her, and glanced around. "What do you think, then?" When he looked back at her, he had a slight smirk. "Not bad for our first formal dinner."

Understanding what he meant – it was generally expected that a couple's first real date would come before they agreed to marry each other - Ginny smiled. "Well, apart from the fact that it's just a bit late... it's lovely."

The same waiter that Tom had spoken to earlier arrived with two menus, and hovered in the background while they chose their meals, before bowing with a smile, saying something in rapid Spanish, and turning away to push through some back doors on the other side of the room.

Ginny then paused, biting her lower lip. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to openly say, 'where's my present'. It seemed a bit demanding. "So..." she trailed off.

Tom rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten your gift,” he said, smirking again at her childish insistence on presents. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box, similar to one that was usually used to package jewellery, but the rattling inside seemed far too noisy and heavy for a necklace or a bracelet.

Unless it’s made of steel or something.

Then, to her surprise, he also retrieved a slightly larger box, which was brown and very decorative-looking. He weighed them in his hands. “This,” he held up the larger box, and then handed it to her, “is just some chocolates, because no matter how much I dislike it, your obsession with it makes an easy gift – and it’s also to make up for the fact that your birthday present isn’t really a present.”

“Oh, okay,” said Ginny, taking the brown box and peeking happily inside at the layers and layers of fluffy chocolates. Despite how appetising every chocolate looked, she was more interested in what her not-really-a-present present was. “And...?”

“And this...” Tom opened it and took out what was inside – a square metal key that resembled one she had seen before in his door... hm... - and jingling it gently in front of her. “What would you say to moving in with me?”

Ginny’s hazel eyes widened. It took a long time for her to be able to take her gaze from the keys, and when she did, her face cracked into a grin, looking up at Tom. “I’d love to,” she exclaimed, and would have scurried around the table to hug him tightly, had it not been for the arrival of their food.

Tom leaned across his meal to kiss her forehead. “Happy nineteenth birthday, Ginevra.”

The food in itself passed fairly quickly with discussions of Ginny’s promotion, Eleanor Fionn, and wedding plans. Not much was actually arranged in the daze of thinking I’m getting married... I’m getting married... but more ideas were laid down for consideration, and it passed time, meals, and several glasses of wine.

An hour or so later, Ginny traced the rim of her wine-glass with one finger, observing the bottom of the glass with its miniscule pool of leftover red wine.

“Shall we go?” Tom suggested, standing and offering her a hand.

She took it. “Okay.” He pulled her to her feet and she followed him through the restaurant, thanking the waiter who’d served them as Tom paid a bill that he refused to let her see – something that she didn’t like. She hated knowing that people had spent a lot of money on her; it made her feel guilty.

As they headed outside, Tom asked, “Do you want to go for a walk?”, to which she agreed. Their night was over, she knew that, but she didn’t feel like going home. It was that feeling of staying at a friend’s house and never wanting their time together to end.

While they moved through the quiet streets of London, Ginny noticed that those thick clouds that had earlier obstructed her view of the sky had cleared, revealing a perfect night, dotted with the brightest stars – one of which, she recalled, almost dizzily happy, was hers, and a full moon.

“Be careful for werewolves,” said Ginny in a conspiratorial whisper, pointing at the moon.

“I will.” Tom smirked down at her.

Her feet hurting from her stupid high-heeled shoes, she ducked to remove them, and swung them from one hand, her other hand holding one of Tom’s, using him to keep her balance as she carefully walked along the kerb of the cobbled road.

“You always seem to be accompanying me barefoot,” Tom said, referring also to her seventh-year Hallowe’en barbeque, when she had danced all even without any shoes.

“High-heels are painful,” she informed him. She sighed, hopping for a moment as she shook out her foot. “I think that from that now on, I’m

just going to accept that I'm a midget and get on with life. Pretending to be tall is killing my feet."

They were getting the slightly busier part of town, moving past a large, important-looking office-block; traffic wailed, much closer and louder now than it had been before, by the restaurant. Someone sprinted at a ridiculous speed from the office-block neck to them, almost crashing into them, and then raced on. Tom, seeing this, frowned.

"Maybe we should-"

And then the world exploded.

BANG.

The next thing that Ginny knew was that there was a pain at the back of her head, and she was lying flat on her back in the middle of the road, staring in horror at the office block beside them go up in flames. She could hear screaming – someone crying – she could see a body nearby. It took a moment for the shock to sink in, and then she realised: I've got to get out of here.

She turned quickly, despite the pain, and said urgently, "Tom-" Then she froze.

Where was Tom?

"Tom?" she called, struggling to her feet. Her shoes were nowhere in sight, and she could feel that her feet were probably burned, but she couldn't understand anything except the mind-numbing panic that was taking over every sense in her body. "Tom?" She spun, staring desperately in all directions through the smoke and flames, the howl of a fire-engine coming. "TOM!"

She stumbled forwards, her brain rapidly making calculations that she never normally would have been capable of.

If the office was there and that was where the explosion came from, then we were blown in this direction, and I probably went further

because I'm lighter so he's probably closer to the building than I was, but he wouldn't have moved sideways surely because-

"TOM!" she yelled, her eyes stinging as she neared the building, and then she saw him.

He was lying limp on the pavement a few metres away, not that far from where she'd landed, not seeming to be moving, the light of the flames throwing a distorted orange across his pale face.

"TOM!" She ran forwards, limping slightly due to her sore feet, staggering towards him and then dropping to her knees.

He's okay he's okay he's fine, look, he's okay, he's breathing-

In fact, Tom seemed to be perfectly fine, save for a thin cut under his left eye that looked as though it had just been cleanly sliced by flying glass... but he seemed to be okay. She wrapped both of her hands around one of his, holding on tightly. "Tom – Tom –" She ducked to kiss the cut underneath his eye, his unmoving eyelashes tickling the bottom of her nose. "Tom - you have to get up – it's not safe-"

By this time, the fire engines had arrived, spurting huge quantities in every direction, and it seemed to be the back-spray more than her presence that woke him up. Slowly – too slowly for the pounding of Ginny's heart to be able to stand – to slowly for the roaring of the flames that was everywhere - his eyes fluttered open, and then, even more slowly, focused on her.

Their eyes met, and in a second they realised how close they'd both come to being killed. They weren't going to live forever.

Live for tonight.

In an instant, with energy as though he hadn't just been knocked out, as though instead he'd been electrically charged, Tom stood, using the fact that Ginny was still holding his hands to pull her to a standing position as well, and then crushed his lips to hers.

Flames dancing around them, smoke swirling, water bouncing off every surface nearby, the wail of fire engines and police cars, the scream of someone trapped – all of this going on around them, and all that they knew or even noticed was that they needed each other.

Her arms were tight around his neck, pushing her mouth into his, eyes closed in the most fiery bliss that shouldn't even exist – his fingers tangled in her hair, biting down on her bottom lip almost viciously –

Crack – and they Disappeared.

Appearing instantly again into the world in front of the door marked 21-5D, Redrick Apartments, staggering backwards as one, pressing Ginny's back flat up against the door, standing between her legs, the tip of his tantalising tongue tracing her lips, her dragging him closer, heartbeats drumming as one faster than should ever have been possible.

Tom fumbled at the key, both too intoxicated by each other to curse the Anti-Apparating wards placed on every witch or wizard's house – clenching the skin of her throat between his teeth until she gasped - and then, with a crash, the door finally came open, and he kicked it closed behind them, far too busy to check if anyone had been watching them appear out of thin air, far too busy to care.

They were both on auto-pilot now, they knew what happened – his hands scouring her skin, the straps of her green dress falling from her shoulders, her hands tearing at the buttons of his white shirt, desperate for as much as him as she could have – because it was happening, it was really happening – and Christ, she wanted him.

He reached around, down, scooped her up in his arms, cradling her to his bare chest, her legs twined around his waist, her lips tangled with his, tightening her arms around his neck – then her hands slipped down his hot back, and his head dipped to her shoulder, biting the skin there, and lower, and lower – her hands slipped lower, and lower, and she grabbed hold of his belt buckle, pulling him closer, her fumbling fingers brushing accidental shapes against his warm stomach –

And then, suddenly, he stopped, still carrying her, gasping for air, and their eyes met again.

His eyes, dark and flashing and at that moment so violently emotional that it would have left her breathless had she not already been robbed of any idea of breathing – focused on her, though fighting to concentrate, his breathing so loud and laboured that it seemed painful.

“You...” he struggled to get the words out, which probably wasn’t helped by still having her pressed to his bare chest, her heart almost slamming out of her body and into his. “Are you... you... sure...”

Ginny stared straight into those eyes, and the only answer that she gave was a whispered, barely audible, “I love you”.

For just a few seconds longer, he still stood frozen, his chest heaving with exertion – and then he smashed his mouth back into hers, both of them surrendering the battle of resisting each other, and he carried her through to the bedroom.

xxx

A/N: Yeah, that’s as detailed as I get. Sorry that I can’t write much here. My laptop has been confiscated so I’m not even supposed to be on it and there’s approximately ten minutes before my parents get back, in which time I also have to oven-bake and eat an entire pizza. Go me. I’m great, aren’t it? Well, what did you think? HINT HINT. Review!

Chapter Nine: Sleepy Morning

His eyes, dark and flashing and at that moment so violently emotional that it would have left her breathless had she not already been robbed of any idea of breathing – focused on her, though fighting to concentrate, breathing so loud and laboured that it seemed painful. “You...” he struggled to get the words out, which probably wasn’t helped by still having her pressed to his chest, her heart almost slamming out of her body and into his. “Are you... you... sure...”

Ginny stared straight into those eyes, and the only answer that she gave was a whisper, barely audible, “I love you”.

For just a few seconds longer, he still stood frozen, his chest heaving with exertion – and then he smashed his mouth back into hers, both of them surrendering the battle of resisting each other, and he carried her through to the bedroom.

xxx

Sleepy morning came.

Ginny’s eyes fluttered open slowly, and she found herself squinting at the glimpses of glaring sunshine that fought through the dark green curtains, sheets tangled around her waist.

Kneading her bleary eye sockets with her knuckles, she twisted and stretched, before giving out to a yawn. Then she thought to glance sideways, but found that the other side of the broad double-bed was unoccupied. She had blurry half-awake memories of someone slipping away, a cold hand curled around her waist withdrawing.

She rested her head back against one of the squashed pillows nearby, but lay still for only a few seconds before sitting up clumsily and kicking the sheets off. A glimpse of a clock showed that it was about twelve-thirty.

Jesus.

She yawned again, and then stood, grabbing some nearby clothes that she saw flung across a chair; she emerged from the bedroom a moment later, dressed.

Tom was visible through the wide doorway of the kitchen across the hall, probably making something, judging by his constant shifting in front of the kitchen counter. He was already dressed, though not fully – in plain black trousers and a plain grey shirt – but had as of yet failed to meticulously brush his hair as normal, and it was instead standing up in thick clumps and tufts all over his head.

Smiling slightly, Ginny leaned one shoulder against the kitchen doorframe, folding her arms across her stomach. “Morning,” she called.

Not seeming startled at all to have her suddenly appear behind him, Tom looked over his shoulder at her, also smiling. The cut under his left eye from the office explosion was magically healed, leaving only a faint pink line where the skin was still hot. “Good morning.” His eyes then flickered from her face; his eyebrows rose slightly. “Oh.”

A frown curved Ginny’s brow. “What?”

“Well.” He smirked, though it was an equally guilty expression as it was smug. “You are absolutely covered in purple marks.”

Ginny narrowed her eyes playfully at him. “And whose fault is that?”

Tom moved towards her, abandoning a bowl of whatever it was that he was making on the counter. “Mine entirely.” He pulled the neck of her shirt (one that she realised now was entirely unfamiliar) sideways, revealing even more purple marks than had previously been visible, and gently prodded one with his index finger.

“Ow,” Ginny mumbled, watching as it paled from the touch and then swelled back violet.

“Sorry.” He leaned down to lightly kiss the bite-mark that he’d just poked, and then kissed her on the lips. “And,” he said, his quiet voice

filled with a teasing tone, “I have to say that you look incredibly attractive dressed in my underwear.”

Ginny looked down at the random attire she’d grabbed from his bedroom, and found that she was indeed wearing one of his black shirts and a pair of boxers.

Oops.

“Yeah... I woke up, and I was just thinking: ‘Hm. Now, what clothes can I wear that would turn Tom on the most?’ And I realised, aha! His underwear.” She winked. “Pretty sexy, eh?”

“Mm.” He ducked his head to kiss her again, this kiss longer and more lasting than the previous. A period of forgotten time later, he drew back, smiling against her mouth.

She gave him another quick peck on the lips before realising that her stomach was demanding priority. “Whatcha making?” she asked, peering around him to try and see what was in the bowl.

“Pancakes... I think.” Tom stabbed at the brown mixture in the bowl with a wooden spoon. “I’m quite certain that they’re pancakes.”

“How can you not know?” Ginny asked.

“I am not a good cook. I make things, and whatever the food wants to be, then that is what it will probably turn out to be. What I try to do has little significance in the matter.” Tom used the spoon to turn over some of the mixture.

“Cool. Can I help?”

“Alright.”

He showed her how to stir it – something that, in theory, should have been extremely obvious, but wasn’t to Ginny – and he was helping her to tip some of the mixture into the pan when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Tom said. "Don't let the pancake burn. Flip it over after a short time." Still giving instructions over his shoulder, he opened the door-

"WHAT SORT OF ABOMINABLE AND X-RATED THINGS HAVE YOU BEEN GETTING UP TO WITH MY FRIEND?"

Ginny's eyes widened. Grace. Oh. Crap.

Ginny peered around the edge of the door as Grace exclaimed, "Hi, Romeo!" Ginny kicked her. "Tom, even," the brunette corrected. "What time can I expect my friend back?" She was prone to worrying.

He glanced at his watch. "Eleven o'clock at the latest, probably."

...Oops.

"What-?" Tom said, looking alarmed. "I-"

"ELEVEN O'CLOCK, MY ARSE!" Grace yelled. "WHERE IS SHE?"

Deciding that now was her cue to save her fiancé before Grace started trying to strangle the answer out of him, Ginny poked her head through the doorway of the kitchen so that she was visible, and held up the pan.

"Hi, Grace," she chirped. "Pancakes?"

In response, Grace just stared. It became apparent that she, too, had noticed the vast quantity of purple marks dotting Ginny's throat.

Ginny sighed. "Grace. Outside. Now." She passed the pan over to Tom, and marched through the front door, dragging her friend behind her, and then closed the door over. She then reluctantly turned. "Okay, get it over with."

Grace sucked in a huge gasp, and then she started. "OHMIGOD!" she shrieked. "Ohmigod! You – and – you – and him – and – Ohmigod!" She clapped her hands together. "Did you really-"

“...I stayed the night, I’m covered in bite-marks, I’m making breakfast at twelve-thirty, and I’m wearing his freakin’ underwear, Grace,” said Ginny wearily. “Answer that for yourself.”

The brunette squealed with delight.

“So what happened?” she demanded, her expression suddenly deadly serious but her eyes still gleaming with mischief. “Was it all romanceville, or was he just kind of like, ‘Ginny, get your arse over here and make a man of me!’ or what?”

“And that, Grace,” Ginny said firmly, “is something that you are never going to hear about.”

Grace’s face fell. “Oh, please?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Oh, fine. Just... tell me – thumbs-up, thumbs-down?”

Ginny bit her lip to stop from beaming like a retard, but found herself grinning anyway, and held both hands out to her friend in a thumbs-up gesture; Grace squealed loudly, bouncing up and down.

“Anyway,” Ginny added, “for my birthday present, he asked me to move in with him, so technically I wasn’t doing anything wrong...”

“Oh, you’re moving in together! It’s so cute and perfect.” Grace clasped her hands together. “I swear, if you were any cuter, you’d be pink and fluffy.”

“For God’s sake, you’re acting like Pippa. I thought it was her job to coo over how adorable everything is.”

“Well, Pippa’s not here, is she?”

“Whatever.” Ginny couldn’t be bothered with pointless arguments – she never won them, as Grace had a strange, confusing way of twisting everything that she said so that Ginny’s own words seemed stupid. “I’ll see you later, for lunch, maybe.”

“Okay.” Grace gave a big, exaggerated wink. “Have fun.” Then she Disapparated.

She’s so insane it’s almost ridiculous.

Ginny pushed open the door to Tom’s (and mine, she thought gleefully) apartment, and moved through to the kitchen. “Argh,” she grumbled, sinking into a nearby chair. “She’s so pestering-y.”

“Remind me, what exactly was all of that about?” Tom asked, shuffling a pancake onto a plate and holding it out to Ginny.

She took the plate and gratefully started to munch on her pancake, not caring to get cutlery, or anything to put on top of it. “Oh, just Grace being... Grace.” She rolled her eyes. “And you have no right to look so innocent, by the way, Mr. We’ll-Be-Back-By-Eleven-At-The-Latest. She worries like you would not believe. She probably thought that you’d kidnapped me or something.”

Tom considered this. “In a way, I did kidnap you,” he said thoughtfully. “Anyway, I said that we would back by eleven because at the time, I thought that we would.” He served his own pancake and sat down beside her. “You staying here was... spontaneous, to say the least.”

“I have to say that her shouting at you was funny, though,” Ginny chuckled. “I don’t think you’ve ever looked so scared of a single person in your life.”

“I wasn’t scared of her,” he scoffed. “I was slightly alarmed though, at demands of knowing what we had been doing...” He raised one eyebrow. “Well, alright,” he said, mocking what he could have said, “if you really want to know – I started off by removing her clothes and eating as much of her throat as I could reach-”

“Shut up,” Ginny scowled, hitting him on the arm, but then moved to stand in front of where he was sitting and kiss him. And it was just cruel irony that three years ago she’d never have thought she could be so happy.

xxx

“Are these in the throwing-out pile?” Philippa Decrow demanded incredulously, holding up a pair of high-heeled boots.

Ginny glanced over her shoulder at the offending items. “Yeah.” She turned to look back the numerous boxes where she had stashed her stuff while she lived in Grace’s house, sorting through what was and wasn’t necessary.

Philippa and Grace were both pitching in to help Ginny pack for moving in with Tom, and the latter two had both insisted on using their together-time to attack the subject of her wedding – and to steal the stuff that she was getting rid.

“Ooh, can I have them?” Philippa asked, raising her voice over both the sound of Ginny’s new Kids In Glass Cauldrons record playing their hit single, and the sound of Grace loudly rambling about the cat that she was getting. “They’re really nice.”

“Okay – but I’ll warn you, they hurt.” Ginny groaned, looking into a large tub of broken colour eyeliners. “More of my beautiful babies to die.” She threw them at the getting-rid-of heap.

“Thanks!” the ex-Ravenclaw exclaimed, hugging the shoes to her, and adding them to the growing mound of Ginny’s possessions that she was pilfering. “I have a dress that would set them off really nicely – I know! I could wear it to your wedding!”

“OH!” Grace emerged from underneath her bed, where she was trying to find the remainder of Ginny’s things, thoughts of cats forgotten. Her hair was wild, and tangled with bits of dead dust-bunnies. “I call dibs on organising your wedding dress! And I called first dibs, so you can’t argue! HAH!”

“Aw, no fair!” Philippa complained. “I wanted to!”

“Well, you can’t, because I am-”

“No-”

“Yeah-”

“SHUT UP!” Ginny yelled, leaping to her feet. She scowled at her two best friends. “Have you ever considered that I might want to organise my own wedding dress?”

“No,” both of the two other girls immediately began to protest.

Ginny heaved a sigh. “Merlin, you’re like toddlers. Fine. Grace, you can do the dress because you called first dibs – sorry, Pip – hey, shut up, I’m not finished – and Pippa, you can organise the bridesmaid dresses.” She glowered at them. “Happy now?”

Philippa and Grace were silent for a moment. And then:

“Can I do the flowers?”

“ARGH!” the redhead bride-to-be grabbed her skull, jumping up and down in frustration. “Stop it! Both of you, sort it out amongst yourselves, I don’t really care! If you really care that much about my wedding, then you can both be the planners of it, okay?”

“Do I get any say in this?” asked Tom bemusedly, from where he had been quietly sitting in the nearby armchair, watching the whole scene unfold.

“NO!” all three girls simultaneously shouted at him.

Exasperated, Ginny sank to sit on the floor, gripping a nearby box for support, but it was only made of cardboard, and it ripped, spilling its contents all over the already-messy floor.

“Oh, screw it,” she groaned, keeling over and burying her face in her arm, while Grace and Philippa squabbled over who was going to cater.

“Who’s invited, then?” Grace asked, having been defeated for the catering. She came over to sit in front of Ginny and helped to tidy up the numerous small items that had escaped the broken cardboard box.

Ginny sat up, pushing her hair out of her face. “Er. Me. Tom.”

“No kidding.”

“You and Pippa... your family... Alden, and his family – including Dominic, if he’s better by then. Antonia Durrell... Luke... Heather... maybe Ramira Xue and Jack Swithin from school... maybe Flora as well, but she was kind of a bitch to me last year... my friends Beth and Louise from work...” Ginny was ticking off her fingers, but struggling to think of any more, repeatedly bouncing the same finger as she tried to come up with a name to put on it. It wasn’t helped by the fact that neither Ginny nor Tom had any family. “Who else?”

“No offence, but it’s going to be a freakin’ tiny ceremony,” Philippa pointed out.

“Thanks for that in-put.” Ginny huffed, resting her chin on her palm. She looked up at Tom wearily for help. “Anyone you want to invite?”

Her fiancé considered this. After quite some time, he said slowly, “Fionn.”

“Oh yeah!” Ginny beamed. “Good idea.” She winked at Tom. “I’ll especially tell her that it’s an invitation from you.”

“Yes, you do that,” Tom muttered. “I hope you have fun setting me up for agonising torture.”

“Believe me, I will.” She smirked.

"I know who you could invite!" Philippa exclaimed. "You could invite Sco-"

Ginny flinched slightly, knowing that they were going to say Scott – a friend who she hadn't been as close to as some others, such as Alden, Grace and Philippa, for example, but she had still been close to... and she hadn't heard of him since the end of school, when he had quite bluntly told her that he wanted nothing to do with her.

"Shut up," Grace abruptly hissed, aiming a swift kick at the other girl, who was well-known for not being able to keep her mouth shut.

"Oops." Philippa flushed red. "Forgot."

"What?" Ginny frowned. "I'm not stupid, you know. I know that you were going to say Scott. And I miss him, yeah, but I'm not going to go into hysterics if you mention him. You don't need to panic."

"I know," said Grace, smiling blandly. "Sorry. I just – I dunno."

However, Philippa was twisting from side to side awkwardly, biting her lower lip and avoiding looking at Ginny, quite determinedly keeping her mouth shut. She was such a bad liar that it was almost funny.

Ginny's suspicious hazel eyes flickered from one lying young woman to the other. "What's going on? What about Scott?"

Grace's broad smile slipped from her lips. "Oh, now you've done it," she said darkly, casting a glare at Philippa, who cowered and mumbled repeated apologies.

"Why - what's happened to Scott?" Ginny asked, a feeling of dread overcoming her from Grace's unusually sombre expression, and Philippa's evident guilt. "What the hell is going on?"

With a heavy sigh, Grace pushed a hand backwards through her hair. "Don't you read the Prophet?"

"I work there – I don't have to."

"Well, you should," Grace said quietly, her voice low with sympathy. "He's been missing since August."

Stunned, Ginny stared. "Missing?"

Philippa snorted with bitter humour. "They only say that because they couldn't find the body-"

"Pippa!" Grace snarled, furious.

Oh my God.

Ginny's mouth fell open, eyes wide. "He's dead."

"Missing," Grace corrected brightly, trying to be cheerful to make her friend feel better. "Nothing's been confirmed as of yet."

"Scott Reeve, my friend, has been missing since August, almost certainly dead, and yet neither of you thought to tell me?!" Ginny stood, her voice slowly rising in volume until she was almost shouting. "And that includes you!" she accused, turning to Tom. "I had lunch with you about three weeks in your apartment, and spent at least two minutes talking about Scott, and you never thought to mention that he's dead?"

"We thought you knew!" exclaimed Grace and Philippa.

Ginny turned on Tom. "What's your excuse?" she ranted. "You read the newspaper all the time, telling me what's happening – and you just skip over the news on Scott's case, do you?"

"I didn't want to tell you until it had been confirmed that he was alive or dead," Tom said quietly. "I didn't want you to have false hopes that he might be alright."

"I'm not an idiot! I know that being 'missing' for four months means dead!"

"I'm sorry."

Upset, Ginny folded her arms across her chest, fighting the urge to pout like a small child would when throwing a tantrum. "You know I hate people not telling me things," she said unhappily.

Her friends mumbled apologies, but her mind was already away with Scott.

"You know as well as I do that you can't be friends with someone you're in love with. You discovered that with Riddle. I discovered that with you. There comes a time when you have to decide." Scott tore his eyes away and stared darkly at the floor. "You made your decision before I even knew you were deciding."

Her heart hurt. If she had known that it would be the last thing she ever heard of him, then she would have acted differently. She didn't know what she would have done, but she would have done something.

Anything was better than a fragile hope that they might still be friends, unknowing of his death.

xxx

A/N: YAY! The plot is finally starting. –roll eyes- Sorry that it took so long to get to this point. Nine chapters before it gets to the important stuff. Geez. Well, the plot starts now – albeit a random, slightly predictable and messed-up plot.

I went with my GCSE Drama class into West End to watch The Woman In Black and it is actually the scariest thing I have ever seen. I spent the majority of it curled in my friend's lap, hyperventilating, screaming, and having uncontrollable leg spasms. It's amazing – I was so twitchy for twenty-four hours afterwards! Seriously, my brother turned on the hot water and I screamed; in RE, the teacher dropped the textbooks onto my desk and I nearly jumped into my friend's lap. And then, to top it off, I had a sleepover straight afterwards watching The Ring and stuff. ARGH! SHE COMES OUT OF A WELL!! :O Well, I'm happy.

REEEVVIEWWWW.

Oh, I had this really weird mental video last night. You know how Tom asked if she was sure before... -cough-?

Tom: Are... are you sure?

Ginny: Well. Actually, now that you mention it... I think we should wait a little. I mean, we aren't even married yet or anything. I think we should wait.

Tom: -silently staring at her-

Ginny: -self conscious- What?

Tom: ...Are you freakin' KIDDING ME?

Ginny: I just think we should at least wait until the honeymoon, you know. So... can you put me down now?

Tom: -drops her on the floor- ...Bitch.

LOL. Sorry. It was really vividly in my head. Haha. Can you just imagine if she'd said no? They'd be all hot and rumped and turned-on... and just sitting in their apartment, like: "...So." Teehee. Anyway, please review!

Chapter Ten: Boxes And Boxes

“Scott Reeve, my friend, has been missing since August, almost certainly dead, and yet neither of you thought to tell me?!” Ginny cried, standing. “And that includes you!” she accused, turning to Tom. “I had lunch with you about three weeks in your apartment, and spent at least two minutes talking about Scott, and you never thought to mention that he’s dead?”

Her heart hurt. If she had known that it would be the last thing she ever heard of him, then she would have acted differently. She didn't know what she would have done, but she would have done something. Anything was better than a fragile hope that they might still be friends, unknowing of his death.

xxx

Hearing the rattle of Tom getting his keys out, Ginny exclaimed, “No – wait!” and leapt forwards to push his hand away from the keyhole. “I want to do it.” She spent a good five minutes burrowing in her numerous pockets searching for it before she could get at it, under several empty packets of chewing gum, not to mention a lot of packing boxes that had been shrunk to fit in her pockets; she pushed the key in the lock... turned it... click.

The door swung open.

Ginny giggled, clapping her hands together.

Two weeks of autumn holidays were drawing to a close (it was now Friday, and work began again on Monday) and that was how long it had taken to sort out all Ginny's things – possessions that, considering she'd only lived in this era for three years, there seemed to be a lot of. However, it couldn't be said that she was moving in so late just because she had a lot of stuff to pack... there was also the issue that it had been a few days of what Grace so wittily called 'being the cause of things that go boink in the night' before she even considered that she might need the rest of her things.

"You are so easily amused," Tom said disbelievingly, shaking his head as he pushed the door open with his foot to carry a box through. The majority of the boxes were minimised to fit in their pockets, but some didn't even fit when shrunk, and had to be carried.

"That's me." Ginny bent low to push two stacked boxes through the doorway, and then went back to get the last box, before closing the door behind them. She eyed the four containers before her. "Right. Where do we start?"

Tom proceeded to take the rest of the tiny boxes from his pockets, laying them out on the floor spread out, and then flicked his wand, enlarging them back up the size.

It was then that Ginny realised that despite all of her cutting-down-crap efforts... she still had so much stuff.

"Oh, Merlin, there's loads of it," she groaned.

"You've still got your pockets to unpack," Tom pointed out, just to make her feel better.

"Bloody hell." She pulled the inside lining of her pockets out, tipping all of the boxes onto the floor. She heard several loud smashes. "Damn. There was probably something fragile in there."

"Probably. Okay – I'll help." Tom nudged a box with his toe. "What's in each one?"

"Er. Hang on... those two are clothes... and that one is shoes... but – wait. No, that's the shoes box... so what is that? Damnit. Okay, I have two shoe boxes-"

"How many shoes do you have?"

"-and that is bathroom-y stuff, I think. Um. Right. That one is books, and that one – the one I just smashed... - is ornaments. That one is school stuff, so we can just not unpack that one... and hide it somewhere, I guess. Maybe sell it. That one next to you is make-up

and jewellery, I think. Or it might be music. ARGH.” She collapsed on the floor. “I don’t know.”

“Let’s try opening some and seeing what’s inside.”

Ginny tore a nearby cardboard crate open and peered inside. “Hey,” she complained. “This is one of the throwing-out boxes!” She glowered. She was certain that it would be Grace’s idea of a joke, to give her loads of boxes full of crap.

“What’s this?” Tom reached into the box and pulled out a thin black book that was vaguely familiar. He flipped to the first page. “Property of Ginevra Aiobheann Peregrine,” he read.

Suddenly, she knew what it was. For her seventeenth birthday, the first year that she had been at Hogwarts with Tom, Headmaster Dippet had given her a diary – in which she’d only put about three or four entries, but all of those entries were not something she wanted him to read.

“Hey, put it back,” Ginny said crossly. “It’s in the throwing-out box for a reason.”

Tom turned to the next page. “The fifth of November, 1958’,” he continued, tilting his head slightly to one side as he read. “It’s been a week since I was down below the dungeons with Riddle’.” He arched one eyebrow. “Well, hello.”

“Give it back!” she lunged to grab it back, but instead fell over the box, and landed in a heap at his feet. “Tom, I’m warning you.”

“Aw, listen to this,” said Tom, smirking and looking very pleased with himself as Ginny struggled to stand up. “...though I still think that there’s more to Riddle than meets the eye’. This is very interesting...” he gave her a smug look. “Your silly teenage fantasies are adorable.”

“They are not-” she jumped up to try and grab the diary, but he held it above his head “-silly-” she clawed at his arm, trying to drag it down, but he just switched the diary to the other hand “-teenage-” she let out a roar of indignation “-fantasies!”

Tom gave her an oh-really look. "You had me fooled." He flipped to the next page. "Hm. 'Malfoy and his idiot friends made a bet amongst themselves to see who could get me to fancy them first, so that they could publicly humiliate me. Well, that backfired. Malfoy cornered me in the Entrance Hall to try and snog my face off – but luckily, Riddle blew his brains out'." Tom clasped the book to his chest. "My hero."

"I did not write 'my hero'!" Ginny gasped. "You're making that up!" She grabbed a record-case for music that had broken long ago and threw it at him, which he dodged easily. "Give it back!"

"I never thought that he, of all people, would come to my rescue. I never thought he cared'. Do you think that he even knows how I feel?" Tom improvised at the end, with a woeful sigh.

"Stop it!" Ginny hurled a bar of weird-smelling soap at him, which bounced off his shoulder – it couldn't have hurt, but he took a step backwards in surprise. "I didn't even like you at that time."

The next entry that he read out, she was horrified to find actually was a silly teenage fantasy.

"Well, well, well." Tom's eyebrows lifted. "'The fourth of February, 1959. Holy shit. Tom kissed me'."

"DON'T READ THAT ONE!" she yelped, running forwards as fast as she could-

She only sprinted towards him because she half-expected him to move out of the way, and was therefore alarmed when he didn't, and she crashed into him with all the force of a sledgehammer-

Stumbling-

And then suddenly found herself pinning him to the wall, her hands wrapped around his wrists, pressing them to the wallpaper either side of his head, her lips mere millimetres from his.

“Let go,” she told him firmly, and without any complaint, there was the flutter and thump of paper dropping to the floor. She didn’t watch it fall, nor did she retrieve it. She was suddenly preoccupied with the loud heartbeat she could feel in Tom’s wrist, her own pulse speeding to match it; preoccupied with his ragged, shallow breath fanning across her face.

“Do you think that unpacking can wait until later?” Tom asked, the corners of his slightly-parted lips twisting upwards in a smile.

Ginny didn’t even answer – she was too busy taking his clothes off.

xxx

As a bell rang sharply twice to signify the start of her coffee break, Ginny finally found the address of Celestina Warbeck – currently only twenty-five, which was weird for her – to write and schedule an interview for someone in the office called Gladys, who wrote the music section.

“Stupid book,” she complained to herself of the thick tome that was the Wizarding version of the Yellow Pages. “You wouldn’t think that there would be more than one Celestina Warbeck, but no.”

She picked up a quill and scrawled down the address, taking several attempts at the ridiculously complicated name of her stately manor in Derbyshire.

“You nearly ready?”

The voice of Beth Menzies floated over Ginny’s shoulder, causing her to jump, startled, and splodge a huge ink stain over the finally finished name of Warbeck’s expensive house.

“Menzies!” the redhead groaned, hitting her forehead repeatedly on the desk of her new little work-cubicle, of which she was quite proud. It had a drawer and a chair and a plant and everything. “It took me ages to write that.” She cleaned up the ink mess with a flick of her wand, but then had to write it all out again.

"My bad. Still – are you ready to go yet?" Beth persisted. "I want some coffee."

"Go get some yourself."

"I'll have no-one to talk to."

"Talk to Louise."

"Louise doesn't talk."

"Hey! That's mean. Yes, she does."

"Anyway, she doesn't drink coffee. Or tea. Or anything."

"Neither do I."

"Tough." Beth poked her, hard, in the shoulder-blade with a plastic spoon.

"Where the hell did you get that spoon from?"

"Dunno. Just found it."

Ginny sighed, flinging down her pen. "Fine. I will come and get the bloody coffee with you – if you'll stop annoying me!" she compromised irritably.

"Done."

However, a thought crossed Ginny's mind, and even as she stood up, she made no move to follow Beth to the refreshments area. "Hey, Menzies." She grabbed the other woman's elbow and pulled her back towards her. She glanced quickly outside of her cubicle to check that no-one else was nearby, and then asked tentatively, "...Who does... deaths in the Daily Prophet?"

She had worked out that if Grace, Philippa and Tom had all read about Scott's 'disappearance' in the Prophet, then surely there must be someone in her office-block with a lot of information. Ginny was far

too curious for her own good (she recalled doggedly trying to find out who had been the Hogwarts attacker in her sixth-year before Tom gave in and told her that it was him), and when there was a personal mystery crying to be solved, she just couldn't help herself.

"Sssh," Beth hissed, peering around the side of the cubicle into the next one on the left – Louise's work-space.

"She's not in there. Is it Louise?"

Beth rolled her eyes. "No. Gallantree."

Ginny's eyes widened slightly. "Oh yeah!"

"Ohmigod," whispered Beth. "That's Will Gallantree!" She sucked in a gasp, and hurriedly explained, "He works in crime journalism, so he hardly ever comes down to our floor..."

She mentally slapped herself for having such a poor attention span when people were telling her important things. Honestly, if she was any slower, she would be going backwards.

"So... say, hypothetically," she said slowly, trying to sound as innocent as possible, "if I wanted to find out about something, how would I go about it?"

Beth tutted loudly. "Hah. Don't bother." She raised her eyebrows expressively. "He wouldn't let you anywhere near any of his work. Those autopsy articles are like his babies. No touchie." And, as if guessing what she was going to say next, Beth began to list off all the various ways why tricking him wouldn't work. "He's filthy rich – don't try bribing him – he has an evil side like you would not believe – don't even go near blackmail – and trust me, he can't be seduced."

"What about saying 'please'?" Ginny tried.

The response that she received was loud laughter. "Good luck with that."

Ginny's shoulders slumped with resignation. "Damn."

“Why are you so interested, anyway?” Beth asked curiously. It probably wasn’t the most normal thing for a fairly-new employee to be insistent on examining the case files for dead people.

“A friend of mine is missing.” Ginny left it at that.

Beth paused, and then tentatively asked, “...Reeve?”

“Yeah.” Ginny was grateful when Beth didn’t push her to explain any further. She sighed. “Let’s go get your coffee, then.”

Well, that was that great idea down the toilet.

xxx

Ginny pushed open the front door of what was now equally her apartment, and nudged it shut with her elbow, already taking off her coat. “Hello?” she called, kicking her shoes untidily into the cupboard, and dumping her bag on the sofa.

No-one answered her call.

“Hm.” She crossed to the window to check for any owls, and was surprised to see a large horned owl with the severe look of a extremely well-trained Post Office owl, clutching in its talons an envelope marked, ‘Ginny’. “Oh.”

Upon opening it, she found that it was from Grace, saying:

Ginny,

Well, I’m back at school. It’s so pretty here in autumn, really, there are so many orange leaves. It’s great to kick through, and I had a leaf-fight with the girls in the university apartment next to mine. Two out of three of them like me, I think, but one definitely hates me. Oh, that reminds me! Speaking of apartments, I’ve got my cat now! YAY! He’s small and fluffy and brown and white and he’s so cute even though he likes lying in front of my feet so that I fall over him. I haven’t got a name for him yet, but I’m going to think of a really good

one, and it also has to be a sort of Muggle-y name, because otherwise everyone will be like, 'why has your cat got such a spastic name?' And that would be really awkward.

And Luke asked me out! It's amazing, I know, it's so great! I had this huge test on the nervous system, and I had to remember everything and it was all so complicated, and I had a massive panic attack – you know, and I started hyperventilating and I couldn't stop talking and I went into hysterics and all of that – and then Luke helped me, and he was like, 'whoa! Calm down!' even though it was pretty stupid, because I obviously couldn't, that's why it's called a panic attack, and then to calm me down, he kissed me. Except that it sort of didn't work because instead I passed out – and because I'm at medical school, I know why! I took in way too much oxygen, so my brain was getting foggy and stuff, and then he kissed me, which gave me a shock, so I just sort of shut down for a second. And then when I woke up he asked me out! It's great great great! Honestly, I wish you could have been there, except that not really, because it would be kind of creepy....

And it's annoying because letters here have a word limit so I can only write-

LoveGracexxx!

Ginny chuckled. That was so typically Grace, to view hyperventilating and passing out as romantic. Still, it was sweet, and she was really happy, because Grace and Luke made a cute couple.

The door behind her banged quietly.

"Hi, Tom," she called over her shoulder, composing in her head the answer that she could write. Once completed, she turned and waved the paper at him. "I got a letter from Grace."

"Oh." Tom nodded, moving through to the kitchen to start cooking, as it was already quite late. "What does she say?" Ginny knew that he was totally uninterested, but she was happy that he was humouring her and pretending he cared.

“She’s got a cat! And Luke asked her out!” Ginny tossed the letter onto the coffee table, where she could write her reply out later, and then skipped after him into the kitchen.

“Who’s Luke?”

Ginny stopped. She’d forgotten that Tom and Luke had never met. “Er.” She tried to think of an answer that wouldn’t make him feel bad. He’s a friend I made who comforted me when you accidentally broke my heart? Somehow, she didn’t think that would be very cheerful for him. “Grace’s boyfriend,” she finally chirped, grinning. “Hello,” she added, standing on tiptoe to kiss him.

“Take your time getting around to greeting me,” he said, though there was amusement in his tone.

He kissed the top of her head, and then turned back to making dinner. It was ready in twenty minutes, during which time Ginny set the table and told him about her day (excluding the part where she asked Beth about crime journalism), and asked about his day.

“My day?” he repeated, raising his eyebrows. “Uninteresting.” He passed her a plate and followed her to the table. “Mr. Flourish has confirmed that I will be promoted to admissions assistant, as he feels he is not well enough to deal with it all... lucky for me.”

“It is lucky for you,” Ginny said, frowning, unsure why he was treating a promotion so negatively.

“Not really.” Tom prodded a piece of chicken with his fork. “Infinitesimally higher wages, and a lot more work.”

“Well, you might get another promotion, and then you might get much higher wages,” Ginny suggested. “And as for the work – you’re really smart. You could probably do it faster and better than anyone else.”

Tom shrugged. He looked up at her as though he was going to say something, but his eyes flickered from her face, sideways, to the window. “There’s another owl,” he commented. “It looks like it’s for you.”

“Hang on.” Ginny had one slice of chicken left to eat.

“I’ll get it.”

He returned a moment later, holding the letter out to her. “It’s from Hogwarts.”

“Ooh!” Ginny scrambled to her feet, clapping her hands over her mouth, barely daring to breathe. “My NEWTs exams results! Well, they took their time getting here, but – oh!” She jumped up and down, trying not to be nervous but being nervous anyway.

She took the letter, cringing away from it in her hands as she tore it open. She unfolded it – and looked away.

“You read it,” she said, giving it to Tom, wincing in preparation for what she would hear. Without complaint, her fiancé began to read the table of her results, but only got through the first syllable of ‘Transfiguration’, before she cried out and snatched it back.

Transfiguration – Exceeds Expectations

Charms – Exceeds Expectations

Defence Against the Dark Arts – Outstanding

Potions – Outstanding

Astronomy – Acceptable

Herbology – Acceptable

History of Magic – N/A

Muggle Studies – Acceptable

Arithmancy – Acceptable

Divination – N/A

Care of Magical Creatures – N/A

Apparation – Acceptable

Ginny started bouncing up and down as soon as she read to Defence Against the Dark Arts.

“I got an Outstanding!” she shrieked, handing him the letter and hugging him tightly.

“Well done!” he said after reading it over her shoulder, with her still holding onto him. He smiled when she let go and began her childish victory dance.

“I’m so happy!” she giggled, in case he hadn’t been able to tell. “Now I can actually tell my boss my NEWT exam results, and then she might be forced to give me another promotion!” She beamed. “Oh, I’m so evil!”

Tom gave her a secret smile, retrieving a bottle of wine from the kitchen. “I believe a celebration is in order,” he smirked.

She knew what that smile meant. “Oh, screw that, get to the point.”

Ginny took the bottle of wine, setting it down on the dining room table, and then flung her arms around his neck, pressing her lips eagerly to his; pushing him down onto the sofa, sitting on his stomach, one leg either side of his waist, her mouth gentle at his collarbone.

Shirts slipped off and lay discarded on the living room floor, her weight heavy on his abdomen. Heavy-lidded eyes closed; his head tipped back with a low moan as her lips trailed lower and lower, tortuously soft on his stomach. His short, heavy breaths of something close to pain, building up in loudness –his back arching, an involuntary shudder that shook his frame as the tip of her tongue lightly traced his belly-button, the skin of his hip burning hot between her teeth, a strained, desperate gasp of, “Ginevra,” bursting out.

She smirked, knowing exactly how senseless she was driving him, and it was only at his last absolutely agonised moan of “Please” that she had mercy, and then it began.

xxx

Morning had not yet risen, and yet Ginny woke. She lifted her head, the side of her face pressed to Tom’s bare chest, blinking blearily as a powerful nausea overcame her. “Oh,” she groaned, clamping a hand over her nose and mouth, feeling as though she was going to be horribly sick.

At her movement, Tom stirred on the sofa beneath her. “Y’okay?” he mumbled, only half-awake.

She didn’t answer – she just nodded. After a moment, the queasiness had passed, leaving her cold and sweating, holding her face with a feeling of dread overwhelming her.

xxx

A/N: Wow, because no-one saw that coming. Lol. I got so many different responses from Scott’s disappearance: some were like ‘oh no, he’s gone’ and others were like: ‘YES, he’s gone’. Weird. I CAN’T WAIT TILL FRIDAY. I’m going on CCF camp, which means I’ll be away for two days (no updates, boohoo, sorry) pretending to be in the army and shooting at things. MWAHAHA. I am dangerous.

If you review you get to straddle a fictional Dark Lord of your choice.
XD

Chapter Eleven: Haunted

“Oh, screw that, get to the point.” Ginny took the bottle of wine, setting it down on the dining room table, and then flung her arms around his neck, pressing her lips eagerly to his; pushing him down onto the sofa, sitting on his stomach, one leg either side of his waist, her mouth fierce at his collarbone. Heavy-lidded eyes closed; his head tipped back with a low moan as her lips trailed lower and lower, and then it began.

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xxx

Now that Ginny was no longer running around getting letters and coffee for everyone else at the office and had her own proper occupation, she could go home when her work was finished, as opposed to leaving when everyone else’s was finished. It was because of this that she found herself often getting home quite early, and not having much to do.

“Dum dee dum...” she sang under her breath, getting a piece of chewing gum from inside her bag. She’d been making her way through a lot of packs of gum – she’d always loved it, but for some reason, at the moment, she was really obsessed with it.

Happily munching, she picked up the Daily Prophet from the kitchen counter. She was interested to read it, now able to know who was who when the little names of the editors and writers were mentioned in italics at the top of the article. It was funny... but then again, she was easily amused.

Ginny flipped through it, looking for anything about Scott. He wasn’t mentioned. She was slightly disappointed, but not really too surprised.

He'd gone missing four months ago. The interest in his case had probably nose-dived after a mere few days. Her own interest was similarly lost, and she went to take a book from the bookcase – perhaps she should actually try reading some of the ones that people gave her. There were stories from her seventeenth birthday that she'd never even opened.

Well, I'll start now.

She selected *The Rock Talks*, which her dear friend Grace had long ago completely spoilt the plot for, but she didn't really care, and was flipping to the first page when she noticed that the letter from aforementioned dear friend was still sitting on the coffee table. She still hadn't replied.

Looks as though I'm not going to start now with the books, then.

The book was tossed sideways onto the sofa with a loud flump as it hit the fabric, and Ginny moved forwards to retrieve the letter, trying to remember the reply that she had composed in her mind when she had first been delivered it.

Re-reading Grace's long, excited message reminded her, and she reached for a quill...

Quill.

Damn.

She'd left her quills and parchment at work, on her desk. She could perfectly visualise in her mind where they were – even exactly how they'd been laid out... but the point was that they weren't here. She couldn't be bothered to go back to the office, and it would probably be closed by now anyway.

Glancing around, she couldn't help but be slightly irritated at how tidy Tom. Everything was put away, and she had no clue as to where there might be paper and pens hiding. If this had been set up her way, then every possession she owned would probably be flung messily

across the floor for easy access, or stored in one big trunk to dig through.

Now... if I was a quill, where would I live?

Ginny stood, and began to hunt through the apartment, starting in the living room, even though there were absolutely no places where anything could be hidden. Next the kitchen and the dining room – also unlikely, but you just never knew.

The bathroom proved useless in her search for writing utensils, as did the shoe cupboard, and then she came across the most probable place, leaving her only to wonder why she hadn't gone to the expected place first.

Nonetheless, she continued, peering under the bed and into the wardrobe. Then her hazel eyes fell upon the desk in the corner.

Oh.

Again with not being able to see the obvious.

There was nothing on top of the desk, and so she began to open various drawers, rifling through the contents. She was preparing to fling shut one drawer and open the next when she noticed what she was flicking through. At first it had just been random pieces of paper, random jottings, a book or two, but hiding underneath those...

Newspaper articles.

And every one of them – every single one – was about Scott Reeve.

Her brow furrowed with confusion, pulling them out, and she slowly began to read, her brain struggling to calculate what on earth this stash was so concealed for.

August the seventh.

YOUNG MAN SAID TO BE MISSING – Scott Reeve, aged eighteen years, disappeared one evening in...

August the thirteenth.

SECRET ROOM FOUND – SUSPECTED TO BE SITE OF POSSIBLE MURDER OF “MISSING” MAN – In Sussex, near where eighteen-year-old Hogwarts graduate Scott Reeve was said to have disappeared, a hidden room was found in an old building...

Ginny flipped through faster and faster.

“THERE WAS DEFINITELY A STRUGGLE,” SAYS FORENSIC SCIENCE TEAM ON THE ALLEGED SITE OF REEVE’S ATTACK-

NO BODY FOUND – SUGGESTS THAT REEVE MAY BE ALIVE-

TRIBUTE TO SCOTT REEVE IN SUSSEX – HIS NINETEENTH BIRTHDAY

TWO MONTHS SINCE DISAPPEARANCE OF SCOTT REEVE-

Unable to read any more, Ginny dropped the newspaper articles, breathing hard, her heartbeat pounding in her eardrums. The paper clippings landed heavily on the desk, spraying dust in all directions, but didn’t scatter. They sat still, almost as though staring up at her, telling her what she didn’t want to hear, what she didn’t want to know.

Funny, isn’t it, how Tom’s obviously going to quite some length to hide the details of Scott’s disappearance from you...

Funny, isn’t it, how there was a struggle...

Funny, isn’t it, how Tom’s never liked Scott...

She shook her head. “That’s not true,” she said aloud to confront herself, though whispering, as though she was afraid that she could be lying – even to herself. “He didn’t want me to find out about Scott because he didn’t want me to have a false hope that he might be alive. He didn’t want me to be upset. He was protecting my feelings. He told me so. He...”

Her voice trailed off as she noticed the date on the top newspaper article.

November the eighteenth.

That's... that's today, she realised, her eyes widening. She pushed the papers back into the drawer, slammed the drawer shut, and ran out of the bedroom, hurrying to the kitchen.

She grabbed the Daily Prophet from the counter, where she'd thrown it boredly after dismissing it, and rummaged carelessly through the pages, sometimes ripping them. She counted the pages, watching the numbers tick up on the top corner of each one, reading the order of the pages.

One, two... three, four... five, six... seven, eight... twelve...

Wait.

It wasn't that Scott wasn't mentioned in the crime section...

It was that the crime section wasn't there.

Ginny stared down at the newspaper. Tom knew that she was aware of Scott's disappearance. Tom knew that she didn't care about hearing in general, about him being missing. Tom knew that she didn't like people hiding things from her. Therefore, the question was – why was he still going to such extreme lengths to cover up the facts?

xxx

"Shit," she suddenly gasped, the clock on the bedside table next to her head shouting five-thirty in the morning – and while for the last few times, she'd been able to swallow it down, this time the nausea was far too strong.

Tom blinked bleary half-awake eyes at her as she rolled out of bed, rolled out of his cold arms, and stumbled away.

Ginny would have thought it was funny how slow Tom was to catch on (it was at least a minute and a half before he sat up and mumbled, "Wha's'happ'n'in...?") were she not crumpled on the bathroom floor, clutching the toilet as last night dinner's reappeared.

"Oh, crap," she grumbled, only daring to talk once she was absolutely certain that her stomach was quite finished hurling its contents back out, and slumped to press her hot cheek against the cold floor tiles. It wasn't hygienic, she knew, but she didn't really give a damn.

Now still, not moving, and refreshingly pressed to something icy-cold, Ginny was able to think better, and she began to count.

The twenty-eight of November today... therefore twenty-eight days since she first stayed the night with Tom... and staying the night with him ever since... and sleeping with him very frequently, she had to admit... and definitely much more than a month since her last period... and her stomach felt really weird... and-

"Shit," she groaned again.

Tom appeared in the doorway, looking much more awake than he had been a few minutes ago, and also looking concerned. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Ginevra, what's happening?"

She would have preferred a proper test to verify her theory, but as she didn't think they had been invented yet, she just had to trust her calculations. Her shoulders slumped in a resignation to her fate, she said defeatedly, "I'm pregnant."

For one silent moment, there was absolutely no reaction from Tom. He just stared at her. And then, very quickly, his eyes lost focus, his knees buckled, and he keeled sideways, with a painfully loud crack as he whacked the side of his head on the sink.

What the-?

"Tom!" she exclaimed in horror, sitting up and moving towards him, where he was sitting on the floor, his back pressed against the bath

of the bath, clutching the side of his head. “Oh my God, are you alright?”

“Ice.”

“What?”

“Ice. Shit. I need ice.”

Ginny could slowly see scarlet liquid staining Tom’s long fingers. “Oh, bloody hell.” She ran a hand backwards through her hair. This was not the best reaction she could have imagined – him fainting, hitting his head, and getting a concussion. “Come on – let’s get you to the sofa. You’ll be more comfortable there.”

Tom stood, swaying, and staggered out to the living room, falling heavily to sit on the sofa, blood still trickling between his fingers.

“Oh God oh God oh God,” Ginny muttered, grabbing her wand, and Conjuring an ice pack. She hurried back to kneel next to where Tom was sitting, carefully peering at him. “Hang on, just move your hand for a second.” Once he obeyed, she pointed her wand at the source of blood – a huge, swollen bruise that seemed to have burst. “Scourgify.” She cringed as the blood was siphoned away, leaving behind what looked like a small, erupted volcano on Tom’s head. “Episkey.” The worst of it healed back together, leaving just a large throbbing lump in his skin, and she gently held the ice pack to his head.

As soon as the ice touched his skin, Tom let out a sharp hiss of air through his teeth, flinching slightly. Then he reached up to take it from her, and held it to his head himself.

So far not feeling very confident about the delivery of her news, Ginny rocked back on her heels. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” Tom muttered. “It doesn’t hurt that much.”

“Oh. Okay.” Ginny laughed nervously. That hadn’t been what she’d meant. “How’s your head? Yeah...” she cleared her throat, feeling

awkward. “Because when I asked if you were okay, I wasn’t actually referring to your head...”

Tom didn’t directly answer this. Instead, he just gave a sharp, but tired look at what little of her he could see past the ice pack. “Please tell me you’re not fucking serious.”

Heavily, Ginny blew out her breath. “Well, that’s good, then, because there I was, thinking that you couldn’t take it any better.”

“Shit, you’re serious.” He sighed roughly, pinching the bridge of his nose with his free hand, and then sliding both hands and the ice pack to cover his face. “Shit.”

A feeling that she was going to be sick again was forming within Ginny, but not, this time, because of being pregnant, but because she had thought that having a family – the Riddle family – would be the best thing that ever happened to her. The best thing that ever happened to them. ...Apparently not for Tom.

“Is that all that you’re going to say, then?” Ginny said, her voice choked with the effort of trying to fight back tears that she never normally would have even had sting the backs of her eyes. “Just sit there and swear?”

“What more is there to say?” Tom said, his voice a low, dark mutter, muffled behind his hands, which he hadn’t taken away from his face.

Ginny couldn’t stop the tears from brimming in her eyes now. “I thought you would be happy.”

“Why the hell would I be happy?” Tom shouted, his voice firing louder, his temper exploding, suddenly standing, his ice pack falling forgotten to the floor.

“Because you love me?” Ginny cried as she also stood, tears spilling down her cheeks. This wasn’t how it was supposed to happen... it was supposed to be a good thing...

Tom's face abruptly twisted with an emotion that hurt to look at – like pain, only stronger. "I do love you," he said quietly.

"Then what's wrong?" she challenged.

Tiredly, he sank back down onto the sofa, picking up the ice pack from and holding it to the side of his face again. "Sorry if I'm not exactly over the moon here," he said bitterly.

"Tell me the truth," Ginny said, her voice shaking with inconsolable emotions that she blamed on her stupid pregnancy. "Did you not even think about the possibility that this might happen?"

"Yes, I did," Tom growled. "However, it's due to the fact that my problem is hereditary that I generally tried not to think about it."

"Oh." Ginny's mouth fell open, finally understanding why he was so distressed by the idea of her having his baby. She swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Tom said resentfully, taking the ice pack from his head and turning it over in his hands, restless and uneasy. "It's not your fault." He gave a short, bitter laugh with no humour. "It isn't as though you got yourself pregnant, is it?"

Ginny sighed, still standing, and looking down at the apprehensive, angry face of her fiancé. She hadn't thought of it from his point of view. The memory of him telling her that the Slytherin trait was inherited by family had long ago faded into the back of her mind.

"I'm sorry for upsetting you," Tom said in a bleak, emotionless voice, and he didn't look up at her from turning the ice pack over and over. "Just... go back to sleep."

She hated the idea of sleeping while he sat worriedly on the sofa, giving himself time to think of a thousand reasons to hate this impossible relationship.

"No, it's fine. I don't mind." She made to sit down beside him-

“Go back to bed, Ginevra.”

“No-”

“Go back to bed.” His dark eyes finally locked with hers, flashing, dark, angry, and it was made very clear to her that it wasn’t a request.

Ginny’s shoulders slumped, and, almost like a misbehaving child who has been banished from the society of her friends, she left the room, abandoning Tom to be haunted by his own nightmare.

xxx

A/N: Ooooh dear. That’s not good. In response to the reviewer, yes, it is in theory not two weeks before morning sickness, but in my messed-up mind it was three weeks after bang-bang up ‘till the sickness stuff started. Plus a lot of the pregnancy things in this fic are going to be a bit weird, because due to the fact that I’ve never been pregnant, and I’m not going to ask anyone about it because they’ll think I’m pregnant, all I’ve got is Google. Bear with me. :)

Anyway. About the review. Yup – the summary of Fast-Forward is ‘you always knew it wasn’t going to be easy, but you never knew it would be this hard’ for a reason. What is that special thing that I love almost as much as fluff? And there’s lots of it, coming up soon.

People have been asking for previews again, so what the heck. Okay. Please review, I love you all so much, honestly I do. Thanks loads!

NEXT TIME:

She glanced around at the others. Philippa, as suspected, was doing terribly; Alden was decent, not amazing, but okay, like herself; and Tom...

She scowled.

Tom was annoying her. He’d been detached and uncommunicative all evening, and now, to top it all off, he was owning everyone at poker. She supposed that it was to be expected, since he had

practically worn a poker face for seventeen years of his life, but it was still annoying her.

It was time to take revenge.

Xxx

Chapter Twelve: Poker Face

Ginny stared down at the newspaper. Tom knew that she was aware of Scott's disappearance. Tom knew that she didn't care about hearing in general, about him being missing. Tom knew that she didn't like people hiding things from her. Therefore, the question was – why was he still going to such extreme lengths to cover up the facts?

"Yes, I did," Tom growled. "However, it's due to the fact that my problem is hereditary that I generally tried not to think about it. Don't be sorry," he said resentfully, taking the ice-pack from his head and turning it over in his hands, restless and uneasy. "It's not your fault." He gave a short, bitter laugh with no humour. "It isn't as though you got yourself pregnant, is it?"

Ginny's shoulders slumped, and, almost like a misbehaving child who has been banished from the society of her friends, she left the room, abandoning Tom to be haunted by his own nightmare.

xxx

December came, and brought with it some ease. Ginny and Tom never mentioned the now almost-certain baby to each other, and they definitely didn't tell anyone else about it. At first, it was difficult even to look at each other – how did you pretend that you had no idea what someone was thinking when you knew exactly what was running through their head? – but time went on, and it became easier.

There a few mornings of sickness, where after a moment of staying frozen on the bathroom, waiting to be certain that it was all over, Ginny would emerge to see Tom sitting on the edge of the bed, his back turned on her, staring blankly forwards. However, as the days flew by, the dawn queasiness became more infrequent, and they could almost be themselves.

A letter came from Philippa one afternoon when both Ginny and Tom were back from work.

“Hey, look at this,” Ginny called loudly across the apartment to where Tom was sitting at his desk and working on some of his new tasks as admissions assistant for Flourish and Blott’s. As she walked towards him, she read out, “Ginny and Tom – do you want to go out with me and Alden tonight? We’re going to have dinner in London and see what entertainment we can find. Maybe watch a film, or whatever. Write back as soon as possible with your answer! Love, Pippa’.” She stopped behind Tom’s chair, ducking lower to wind her arms loosely around his neck, resting her chin on one shoulder. “What d’you think, then?”

Tom shrugged slightly, the movement bobbing Ginny’s head up and down. “I don’t know,” he said, surveying the pages and pages of tables and charts on his desk. Ginny had noticed that his voice now seemed to be permanently emotionless – now was no different. “I have a lot of work to do. Ask what time we would meet them.”

“Okay. Will do.”

Ginny knew that he wasn’t particularly interested in going, but she was tired of going to places by herself and coming up with an excuse as to why he wasn’t there.

She tilted her face sideways towards his, observing the side of his face, but couldn’t learn much from his guarded expression. Her eyes fell upon the still-raised bump near his temple where he’d hit his head on the sink, and her heart sank slightly... remembering. She leaned forwards to kiss the bruise, and then let go, pushing off his chair to help her stand up. She watched silently from behind him as he picked up his quill again and began to neatly form notes from several charts, and then turned, walking away.

Philippa’s reply to their enquiry as to the time arrived about two hours later: seven-thirty, eight-ish – we’ll meet at the Leaky Cauldron. A reluctant Tom agreed that this would be enough time for him to finish his work, and so seven-thirty saw Ginny fiddling with the material of her green dress, which she had only worn – and, indeed, only been given - a month ago, and she was absolutely certain that it hadn’t been this tight then.

“Are you alright?” Tom asked, glancing at her as he looked for his shoes.

Ginny hesitated, biting her lip. “Yeah,” she said after a moment. She didn’t want to tell him that her dress was getting smaller, because they both knew what that meant – that she was getting bigger. And that would not put him in a good mood.

He looked as though he didn’t believe her (Ginny wouldn’t have believed herself; her ‘...yeah’ was so late), but didn’t question her.

The two met Alden and Philippa, as promised, at the Leaky Cauldron, and they began to progress down Diagon Alley in search of somewhere to eat.

“Oh, how about there?” Philippa pointed across the street to a small pub called... the Leaky Cauldron.

Ginny frowned, not sure how that was even possible; she glanced at Tom. The expression that she received from him was one of polite disinterest – a slight smile set across a cool, aloof face.

“Pippa,” Alden groaned. “We’ve been following you for fifteen minutes, and you’ve taken us in a massive circle!”

“Oh.” Philippa tilted her head, as though that made her more perceptible to her own idiocy. “Whoops.”

Nevertheless, they chose simply to dine in the Leaky Cauldron – not the most expensive night out, nor the most classy, Ginny thought to herself, but that only reminded herself of her birthday dinner, and what had happened afterwards.

And look where that got me.

“How are you, then?” asked Alden of Tom, and Ginny was glad that her friend was making some effort to distract him – evidently he had spotted that something was wrong. “I haven’t heard from you in a long time.”

“So... Ginny,” Philippa leaned across the table, smirking. “Moved in together? Cosy, eh?” She winked. “Eh?”

Feeling extremely uncomfortable, Ginny decided not to answer this, and her decision was reinforced when she realised that Tom was now (subtly) paying very close attention to the girls’ conversation.

“How’s the bar going?” she asked instead, switching the conversation onto safer topics.

“Boring.” Philippa swirled around the Firewhiskey that she’d ordered in its glass before drinking some. “I want to get a new job. I don’t like it at the bar. Loads of drunk old men trying to look down my top. Hooray. Fun.”

“I could ask if I could get you something in the Prophet,” Ginny suggested.

“Thanks, Gin-”

Though the redhead absolutely hated the nickname for bringing up almost-forgotten memories of a large red-headed family – a boy with glasses – a girl with bushy hair – and a school burning to cinders – she was pleased with herself for barely flinching.

“-but no thanks.” Philippa grimaced. “I’m not really into journalism.” She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I think I might apply for a job at Hogwarts actually.” She grinned. “I could have all the spotty little adolescent boys swooning for me.”

Ginny’s eyes widened. “Pip, that’s illegal.”

Philippa shrugged. The food arrived, and they moved on to discuss how things were going at the Daily Prophet, and what they’d heard from their friends from school.

“-and did you hear about Eleanor Fionn? She’s into forensic science, which I don’t think anyone expected-”

“I know, I heard – it’s so weird-”

“-and then Jack Swithin is training in Auror school, which I think suits him really well... and Ramira is an assistant at a magic pre-school – I’ve been there, it’s so cute. At break-times, they all play with the toy Portkeys and things, giggling as they zap from one side to the other of the playground... it’s absolutely so adorable that it makes me just want to hug all of them and take them home!”

Ginny cringed, remembering what an obsession Philippa had for sweet and fluffy things. It was a good thing that she wasn’t going to tell anyone about the whole pregnancy thing – if Philippa found out, she’d probably explode with the cuteness of it all.

Dinner finished, and the four were preparing to leave to try and find something to do for the remaining time they had when Alden noticed, “Hey – the sign says it’s poker night.”

The others followed his gaze and saw a large poster declaring:

POKER NIGHT

Sunday, December 2ND

“That,” said Ginny bluntly, “is one of the most extravagantly detailed posters I have ever seen.”

“Well, should we go for it?” Philippa asked. “I don’t know about you, but I feel like making some money.”

“Pippa, you won’t,” Alden reminded her. “You can not lie.” He glanced around at Ginny and Tom. “Do you want to?”

“Yeah, okay,” Ginny grinned, and skipped after the two others, looking over her shoulder to make sure that Tom was coming – he followed in an indifferent silence.

xxx

“Okay, re-deal,” called the manager of the Poker Night, standing at the foot of the table. Everyone swept their cards towards a dark

sophisticated-looking woman, whose turn it was to deal, and she sat for quite some time, happily shuffling, before serving everyone their hand.

Ginny observed hers, and fought to keep her smirk hidden. The whole point of this was to have a good poker face... but it was proving difficult not to smile when she had a pair. Five of clubs, five of spades, and some other random cards that she didn't really care about...

She glanced around at the others. Philippa, as suspected, was doing terribly; Alden was decent, not amazing, but okay, like herself; and Tom...

She scowled.

Tom was annoying her. He'd been detached and uncommunicative all evening, and now, to top it all off, he was owning everyone at poker. She supposed that it was to be expected, since he had practically worn a poker face for seventeen years of his life, but it was still annoying her.

"Place bets."

The bets went around the table anti-clockwise. Some people folded (included Philippa, who had taken to pulling out early in the game to save herself the embarrassment of her failing poker-face) but the rest all placed or matched bets.

Alden, seated on Ginny's right, raised the bet.

Ginny glanced at her hand again, and kept her facial expression totally blank. "Ten tokens," she said apathetically, pushing some of her plastic coins into the centre of the table. The idea of the competition was that every time someone won the pot, their name was written down, and whoever had won the most times by the end of the night won five thousand Galleons.

The bets continued around – to Tom, sitting opposite her, one of the last people – "thirty tokens," he said calmly – she swore under her

breath, hating him at that moment – and then everyone else matched it, and the display of hands began.

Yes... yes... Ginny wanted to bounce in her seat with the excitement as everyone revealed their cards... so far hers was the best...

“One pair,” she said coolly, turning her hand over. Someone to her left muttered a profanity.

I AM ON FIRREEE, she thought happily as the other people in the game revealed their hands. Thirty tokens, here I co-

“Three of a kind.” Tom set down his cards, exposing nine of hearts, nine of diamonds, nine of clubs...

Ginny’s mouth fell open.

You piece of... a growl rose in the back of her throat. That was mine, you sneaky bastard!

Her eyes narrowed. Screw it. She no longer cared about winning. All that she wanted was for Tom to lose. She’d been slowly getting more and more irritated with him all night, and now she was going to get back at him.

The cards were re-dealt. Ginny checked her hand. Nothing special. Oh well. She didn’t care anymore. The bets began, moving slowly around the table. Few folded. Excellent.

Alden placed his bet – Ginny slipped off one of her shoes. She placed her own bet – the bets kept going. She was sitting directly opposite Tom, so hopefully it wouldn’t be some other random person who she would get her revenge on...

Tom’s turn.

“Twenty-fi-aaaa.” He suddenly jerked in his chair – for no apparent reason – thus knocking over his neat pile of tokens, and there was a loud thump of his knee hitting the bottom of the table. He cleared his throat, using this ‘cough’ to cover the glare he fired at Ginny.

The redhead could barely keep herself from breaking out in manic giggles.

As soon as he tried to start speaking again, Ginny started sliding her bare toes up his leg again. Now that he knew exactly what she was trying to do, Tom didn't jump again as he had the first time (now that had been funny) but he began to colour quite prominently, and his poker face was really spectacularly failing.

"Twenty-five tokens," he said, his voice shaking slightly, clearly flustered, despite his efforts at maintaining his emotionless façade.

And of course, no-one believed him.

The next betting round went through everyone. Ginny folded immediately, having far too much fun distracting Tom to bother with playing poker anymore.

Alden gave her a glance and mouthed disapprovingly, 'what are you doing?' but she ignored him. It was coming up to Tom's turn again, and it was apparent from his set jaw and stubborn eyes that he was determined not to be caught out again by her frivolities.

Oh, but he would.

Tom now was required to place his bet, and he looked quickly once more at his cards before giving everyone present a gaze of cold nonchalance – though the look he gave Ginny was slightly more irritated than anyone else's. "Fort-

She let some of her hair fall over her shoulder, giving him a smouldering look from underneath lowered lashes, pushing her toes further and further up his leg.

His voice shook and gave out halfway through the word 'forty', and he stared down at the table for a second, trying to compose himself. His face was now quite obviously colouring, his ears looking very hot, and he was breathing slightly harder than he had been a moment before.

“Forty...” he tried again. “Forty...”

And then he made the mistake of looking up into Ginny’s face.

Instantly, he was put under the intense pressure of having a scorching come-hither stare burning into him, her pouting slightly, her head slightly tilted as though to say, come and get me, then... and she pushed her foot higher, even though it now meant that she had to slump down in her chair to reach far enough for her toes to tantalisingly dance across his thigh.

His breath snagged and his hand twitched violently as she started moving her big toe in circles through his trousers, and it looked as though he was having problems starting breathing again.

She licked her lips.

“Fold,” he muttered angrily, sitting back in his chair and crossing his arms.

Ginny actually had to hold a hand over her mouth to stop herself from bursting out laughing.

Alden leaned over to whisper to her. “Can I ask,” he said, his voice slightly criticising, “why Tom seems to be having a lot of trouble concentrating?”

“I’m not really sure,” she replied innocently, looking thoughtful. “I suppose that it could be because I’m turning him on under the table...”

At this response, Alden’s eyebrows lifted almost to his hairline. “You know what,” he said quietly, shaking his head, “I don’t want to know.”

A small laugh burst out Ginny involuntarily, and it could have been due to the sudden sharp exhalation accompanied by the laughter that caused a surprising stab of pain through her stomach. She gasped slightly, but bit her lip to keep quiet. She then watched the game proceed, waiting for it to get around to Tom’s turn before she could start messing around with his head again.

The strange thing was, though, that it seemed to be taking a very long time... as though everyone was moving in slow-motion... and everything was suddenly very, very loud... and as the noise level grew louder and louder, her heartbeat grew louder and louder... and a pain began to build up in her abdomen... and breathing was becoming painful...

She noticed that, very slowly, people were turning to stare at her... still in slow-motion... Tom, his eyes wide, staring, apprehensive... voices, booming everywhere... echoing.

"GINEVRA ARE YOU ALRIGHT-"

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH HER-"

"I DON'T THINK SHE CAN SEE US SHE JUST KEEPS STARING-"

Echoing.

So loud... so loud... breathing hard... pain inside her... pain... PAIN-

"Tom," she gasped, grabbing her stomach, and she saw the look of alarm flare through his dark eyes when he finally understood what was wrong-

And then reality caught up to speed, much too fast, much too loud, voices screaming shouting LOUD-

And she blacked out.

xxx

With her head stinging, Ginny opened her eyes to find herself in St. Mungoes'.

She was lying on what seemed to be a dentists' chair, except tipped all the way back to make a sort of improvised bed. Sitting on either side of her was a very confused-looking Alden and Tom, whose face

seemed totally blank and emotionless, though she could see the distress it was hiding.

“Are you alright?” Alden asked, worried despite the look of puzzlement as to what was going on.

“Yeah,” Ginny said, sitting up slowly, with both of the males on either side of her offering a hand to help pull her up. “Where’s Pippa?”

“She had to go,” Alden explained. “The landlord of her apartment building shuts it all up at midnight, and she didn’t want to get locked out. She wanted to be here, though.”

Ginny opened her mouth to reply, but at that moment, a Healer nurse came in, smiling.

“You’re awake now, are you? Great.” The nurse didn’t wait for any sort of reply. “Well, it’s all good news for you – you just had a nervous attack, nothing serious. We don’t know, obviously, because we weren’t there when it happened,” she chuckled at her own little joke, which really wasn’t funny at all, “but it was probably just your system trying to adjust to the baby-”

Panic flooded Ginny, and she froze for a second, before looking over at Alden to see how he was reacting. He was just blinking at the nurse, his mouth slightly open.

The nurse faltered. “Oh.” She turned to the occupant of her makeshift bed. “You do know, don’t you, that you’re pregnant?” she asked tentatively.

“Er.” Ginny sighed. “Yeah.”

“Good,” said the nurse, relieved. “Otherwise I would have had a lot of paperwork to deal with... you know, in case you went into shock or something. I don’t know.” She adjusted her skirt. “Anyway. The pains you had was probably just your system trying to adjust to the baby, like I said, and I think that you should be okay after a few days, and there shouldn’t be any more incidents. Can I ask, though, if you would like to schedule an appointment for a check-up?”

Ginny glanced at Tom, but he wasn't even looking at her any more. He looked down at his hands, hanging listlessly between his knees, and was for all appearances not paying attention – an appearance that she knew was wrong.

She looked back up at the nurse. "...Okay." She bit her lip. "When would the check-up be?"

"Well, that would have to be scheduled. Your name is Ginevra Peregrine, am I right?"

"Yeah."

"Very well, then; we'll send you an owl with the time and date of your appointment." The nurse shuffled some papers and took a glimpse of her pocket-watch, before giving them a big banal smile. "If you have else that you need to report, then you'll have to check out at reception, thank you!"

And as quickly as that, they were shooed out of the ward.

As they made their way down the stairs from the ward, with Tom holding one of Ginny's arms to support her, as she was still weak and dizzy from fainting, Alden cleared his throat noisily.

"So," he said, looking across at them, "do you want to start from the beginning and try it from there?"

"I'm pregnant," said Ginny tiredly, not strong enough – or even awake enough – to go into long conversations. "End of story. I doubt you want to hear anything any more detailed than that."

"You're right, I don't," Alden said wryly.

"By the way, just in case you weren't certain in any aspect of the subject, not a word of this leaves your lips to anyone," Tom said, speaking for the first time since Ginny had woken up. He stared straight ahead as he spoke; not looking at Alden, and especially not looking at Ginny.

“Of course not,” said the younger of the two men, sounding slightly offended that he could be thought that untrustworthy, but he covered the insult to his pride well. “I won’t tell anyone... in which case, it’s probably better that Pippa went home early,” he chuckled.

Ginny didn’t answer. She was sleepy, as it was past midnight, and she was already drained by the small attack on her system. Also, her thoughts were elsewhere, on another of the many memories that she had almost forgotten.

Another sigh. “You know Salazar Slytherin, I’m presuming?” he didn’t look to her for confirmation, “He... he had children. And... a hereditary set of cursed genes was passed down through the ages. Two children. Any Slytherin descendant would have two children – most commonly, twins. And something that became increasingly common was the attitudes of the children.” He swallowed. “Exact opposites – one sarcastic, one friendly. One sweet, one sour. One good, one... not so much.”

If the baby was, as Tom feared, problematic, so to speak, then it would be easy to tell at the check-up. Quite simply, it wouldn’t be a baby – it would be babies. Twins.

She looked at Tom to see if he had the same worried expression on his face as she had on hers – to see if he, too, had come to the same conclusion about the check-up. It was a useless effort, though. Nothing could be seen past his poker face.

xxx

A/N: Dun-dun-DUN. Okay, more answers to random reviewers. I got a lot of questions, and I know that Ginny’s pregnancy is kind of messed up, but whatever. A lot of people have been asking these questions, so I’m going to answer each one in turn...

Is Ginny pregnant? No duh, Sherlock.

Is it going to be twins? No comment.

Is the good one going to be Molly? Firstly, Molly Weasley's maiden name is Prewett, not Riddle, and secondly, it's sort of weird. So, good idea, but no.

Is the bad one going to be Voldemort? ... I'm sorry if this insults you, but that's kind of a stupid question. :P

I'm pretty sure I got more questions than that, but those were the ones that needed to be dealt with... and those were the only ones I could remember. :D Oh well. TOMORROW I'M GOING ON ARMY CAMP! YAYY! I can't wait. I get to ambush the Year Nines in the middle of the night... Mwahaha. Anyway. Please review, I love you!

NEXT TIME:

"Thanks," said Ginny, giving him a small smile, knowing that he was even edgier about her safety than he had ever been, even though he didn't talk to her much – or even meet her eyes, for that matter. However, at this particular moment, he was meeting her eyes; staring down into her face, his expression totally blank, only his steady gaze reflecting a deep concern. She reassured him quietly, "I'm fine," whilst keeping her voice low so that no-one else would overhear, and he let his hands fall away from her.

Xxx

Chapter Thirteen: Christmas Piggie

If the baby was, as Tom feared, problematic, so to speak, then it would be easy to tell at the check-up. Quite simply, it wouldn't be a baby – it would be babies. Twins. She looked at Tom to see if he had the same worried expression on his face as she had on hers – to see if he, too, had come to the same conclusion about the check-up. It was a useless effort, though. Nothing could be seen past his poker face.

xxx

“Ooh, great!” exclaimed a woman named Gladys at Ginny's delivery of the times for the Celestina Warbeck interview. “These are wonderful, thank you.”

“Anytime.” She shrugged. “It is what I get paid for.”

Gladys gave her a grin, and taking that as her cue to leave, Ginny went to find Angeline and see if anyone else needed any interviews scheduling. Her new job wasn't particularly interesting, but it was definitely better than running around making people coffees, and it paid better, too. She'd had a sneaky idea, though, of trying her hand at some journalism, and ‘accidentally’ slipping it to the Head of the Prophet, Mr. Storne. She wouldn't even dream of giving it to Angeline, but with her father, she had some hope of getting promoted again to a writing career.

“Oh, you're back, are you?” Angeline said coolly as Ginny entered her office. Her dislike for her newest employee had risen greatly at the insult she'd received from Tom, but now that Mr. Storne liked her, Angeline had no choice but to tolerate her.

“Yup,” said Ginny, flashing her boss a cheerful smile, just to annoy her. “Anyone who needs my fabulous assistance?”

Angeline flipped through some papers, her free hand drumming a rhythm on the table-top with her fingertips. “Hm.” With a flourish, she pulled out one, and scanned the writing on it. “William Gallantree. He needs an interview with the Head of the Ministry's Transgression Aurors, within a fortnight.”

Ginny blinked. She had forgotten all about Gallantree and trying to work out Scott's case in the chaos that had surrounded the discovery of her pregnancy.

"Is there a problem with that?"

The slightly mocking voice of Angeline Storne cut through Ginny's thoughts; the older woman was staring at her, one eyebrow slightly raised in a challenge.

"No." Ginny shook her head. "I'll get on it." She nodded respectfully, despite how she strongly disliked Angeline, and then left her office swiftly, her brain moving even faster than her quick feet.

Gallantree – the lead crime journalist – needs to talk to the law police. It could be something to do with Scott.

Immediately, she resolved to seriously get to work on finding out the fact or fiction behind her theories on Scott. Not only was she dying to find out, but it would also help to keep her mind off Tom.

She knew that each floor level of the office had their lunches at different times – twenty minutes after another. Therefore, if she could find out what floor Gallantree worked on, then she could sneak into the canteen at the same time as him, and get a chance to spark up a 'spontaneous' conversation about his work.

When Louise wasn't nearby – or anyone, really, but especially Louise, as the person that Ginny was sort of trying to stalk was a sensitive subject to her – the redhead grabbed Beth and asked, "What floor does Gallantree work on?"

Beth blinked, alarmed by this sudden attack. "What? Er, fourth, I think." She frowned, thinking hard. "Yeah, fourth."

"Thanks." Ginny patted her friend emphatically on the shoulder, grinning. This plan of hers would work – she would see to it.

“Why are you so interested in him all of a sudden, anyway?” Beth asked, looking suspicious of both Ginny’s random behaviour and her constant flow of questions, all revolving around a basis of Will Gallantree this, Will Gallantree that. Her eyes widened. “You don’t fancy him, do you? Louise will kill you.”

“No,” Ginny scoffed. “I don’t fancy him. I’m engaged, remember?”

“So? Doesn’t stop some people.”

Ginny considered this. “True,” she agreed. “But no, I don’t fancy him. Louise can keep him to herself. I’m just trying to wheedle information of him.” She beamed, her reply sounding so ridiculous that hopefully no-one would really believe her.

Now aware of what time Gallantree would be eating, when she got back to work, she deliberately looked through the Wizarding Yellow Pages very slowly, so that she would be able to say to Louise and Beth that she couldn’t go down to lunch until she had finished her work.

Twenty minutes after she should have gone down to get her afternoon meal, Ginny pushed back her chair and headed towards the second floor, where the lunchroom was. Sure enough, she met with the fourth-floor people on the way down – just as planned.

“Oh!” she exclaimed to the nearest person (coincidentally, Will Gallantree). “Wow – I must be really late.”

He gave her an appraising look. “You work on the third floor, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

With a slight nod, he said, “You are really late.”

“Oops.” Ginny forced a blush into her freckled cheeks, biting her lip and glancing up at him through her eyelashes. “I was loaded down with work, and I wanted to finish before I ate. I have so much to do.”

"I know how it is," he replied with a slight smile. "I have loads of work twenty-four-seven."

"Really? What work do you do?" she asked, even though she already knew; her expression, the perfect mix of curiosity and friendly interest.

"I'm in the crime journalism section." Will shrugged as they came out of the stairwell and crossed the food court to queue for the sandwich bar. "It's a bit depressing, but it's really interesting."

"I imagine it would be... so what exactly do you do?" She stood beside him, flipping one strand of her hair around and around.

"I write the articles," he explained. "It's quite difficult, though, as I have to sort through it all." He gave a small smile. "There's a lot that the Prophet isn't allowed to print."

Ginny's interest grew. She'd read through all of the clippings in Tom's desk-drawer, but had found nothing to attract her notice – it had all been comments from Scott's family and closest friends, and constant analysis and re-analysis of the alleged site of his disappearance.

"Really? Like what?"

The queue moved forwards. Ginny grabbed a tuna sandwich and a glass of water.

"Mostly two things – either the gruesome material, which would obviously upset the relations of the victim; that, or the really confidential stuff."

"Why?" Ginny smiled, her face innocent, her eyes burning with that oh-so-familiar of being close enough to almost touch the answer to her mystery. "Is there a lot of confidential stuff?"

"Of course there is," Will said. "It's crime journalism, for Merlin's sake. Like, you know, Reeve-" He abruptly stopped, and then chuckled. "Sorry." He grinned at her. "I've just realised that I'm telling you confidential things, which I'm fairly sure is illegal." He laughed again.

“Whoops.” Then he looked over his shoulder at his friends from his level of the office. “Do you want to sit with us?”

Ginny would have said yes, but she knew that there was no chance of him saying anything about Scott in front of his friends. “I’m okay, but thanks, though.” She wasn’t very hungry anymore.

“Like, you know, Reeve-”

She replayed that one cut-off phrase again and again in her head as she quickly wolfed down her sandwich and hurried back up to her work cubicle.

So there was definitely things about Scott’s case that Will Gallantree – and few others – knew about. Things that weren’t printed in the newspapers.

Things that she was going to uncover.

xxx

“Merry Christmas!”

An echoing repetition from the people inside followed Grace’s cheerful exclamation as she flung open the front door to greet both Ginny, teeth chattering good-naturedly from the thin snow that was progressing down from the clouds, and Tom, standing very close to her, almost protectively, and yet not looking at her.

“Brrr,” Ginny shivered as she hopped over the threshold, shedding her coat, and shaking from her red hair the soft hat of snow that had built up on top of her head. “I swear we lived in London, not Antarctica, but there you go.”

Grace took their outer layers of clothing and stashed them away in a cupboard somewhere, before taking them through to the lounge, where a crowd of mostly familiar faces were displayed across the floor or furniture.

“Hey, you lot!” Ginny grinned, tucking a bundle of presents under a large and extravagantly decorated Christmas tree. “Merry Christmas.”

“Christmas Piggie!” chirped Leah from where she was sitting on the floor and stroking a rather disgruntled-looking cat, whom Ginny presumed was Grace’s new pet. “We’ve got a tree!”

“I can see that.”

“Really? And to think that we thought you were blind,” yawned Luke, only to have a stray bauble aimed at his head; eyeing the small round decoration, probably having heard something of her Chaser skills from Grace, he added hastily, “Only joking!”

“Who else are we waiting for?” Mrs. Dorothy Hartwin asked of her daughter when she came in.

“Er...” Grace glanced at each person present – most of her friends sprawled out on the floor, Jacob’s friends slumped across the sofas, Tom standing silently near where Ginny was sitting, again seeming as though he was protecting her. “I think that’s it, actually.”

“Okay, then; do you all want to come through to the dining room for dinner?”

At the word ‘dinner’, Ginny sat bolt upright, having been lying flat on her back and letting Leah tug at her hair as she clumsily tried to arrange it into weird shapes. “Dinner?” she repeated happily, and leapt to her feet, only to fall straight back down onto her stomach – had Tom not lunged forwards with unexpected reflexes and caught her.

“Thanks,” said Ginny, giving him a small smile, knowing that he was even edgier about her safety than he had ever been, even though he didn’t talk to her much – or even meet her eyes, for that matter. However, at this particular moment, he was meeting her eyes; staring down into her face, his expression totally blank, only his steady gaze reflecting a deep concern. She reassured him quietly, “I’m fine,” whilst keeping her voice low so that no-one else would overhear, and he let his hands fall away from her.

Pulling her eyes reluctantly from his face, she turned to beam at her friends, and followed them to the table. She sat opposite one of Jacob's friends, who she did not know; sitting on either side of her were Philippa and Tom.

Dorothy Hartwin pointed her wand at the many empty (or so they seemed) dishes spread out on the table, and, nonverbally, a Cloaking Spell was lifted so that a feast appeared, met by a chorus of enthusiastic, "Ooh"s and "Aah"s.

"Okay, dig in-

"Wait." Alden cleared his throat, attracting everyone's eyes towards him. Though he looked uneasy, he lifted a wine glass that, previously empty, was now full of dark red wine, and proposed a toast: "To Dominic," he said quietly.

Ginny, who had been whispering animatedly to Philippa, fell abruptly silent. If there were ever two words to make a person's stomach drop out of their body with guilt, then Alden had just said them. Dominic Philips, Alden's thirteen-year-old brother, had been subject to a Quidditch accident last year, and was presently in a coma with some brain damage. As she had been his friend (and still is, she reminded herself firmly, because he's going to be okay) Ginny was very ashamed to say that she had forgotten about him.

"To dear old Dommie," she said cheerily, attempting to lift the mood, "who doubtlessly would have been causing himself some serious bodily harm – through either too much alcohol, food, or dancing – had he been here."

Thankfully, her efforts at brightening the atmosphere in the dining room were successful, as chuckles went around the table, followed by funny stories that they'd heard about Dominic – or about anyone, in general.

A huge three-course meal was pursued quickly by presents.

Ginny in turn received a cookbook from Grace titled *How Not To Poison Yourself*, as when the brunette had come around to their apartment the morning after Ginny's birthday, she had seen her terrible efforts at pancakes... Philippa and Alden both put their money together to buy her a proper record-player for herself, on which she could happily play *Kids In Glass Cauldrons* on repeat, as she'd been longing to. Leah bought her a cheap toy pig; Dorothy Hartwin and Jacob had just given her money, unsure of what she'd like. And from Tom, she was given a warm rainbow-striped scarf and a purple hat.

"Ooh, thank you!"

She knotted the scarf loosely around her neck, pulling the hat over her head so far that it almost covered her eyes, and she turned to grin at Tom – even on the way to Grace's house, she'd been shivering and complaining about how cold she was. She crawled to him through the sea of colourful and crinkly wrapping paper, and bounced a kiss lightly on the tip of his nose.

"You," she said cheerfully, "are a wonderful sort-of-husband-to-be."

Tom gave a tiny smile that appeared, and then, in the same instant, was gone. Ginny couldn't help but think that the close-to-dead expression in his eyes made it seem more like a grimace than a smile – and her theory on his non-genuine smile was confirmed when his eyes flickered down to her stomach, and then he looked away sideways.

With a short sigh, Ginny sat back on her heels, crumpling wrapping paper and tattered Spellotape beneath her.

Well, Merry Christmas.

xxx

A/N: I'M BAAACK! I know, this chapter's kind of boring, but A) I needed to show the passing of time, B) I wanted to write about Christmas, and C) oh well. The next one is better. Well. Worse. But better. Whichever way you look at it.

OMG! Army camp was so much fun. I know that you probably don't care but tough, because I'm going to tell you anyway. :D I have nine massive bruises and chafing on my shoulders; I wore bulletproof heavy boots for THREE DAYS STRAIGHT, not even taking them off to sleep; I've had six hours of sleep in the past two nights; I've been eating corned beef hash out of tinfoil packages for breakfast and setting fire to the woodland around my portable oven thing; I stood on a grenade, which could have killed me, but luckily not; I ran two miles in the pouring rain; and there were so many pretty men! I am soaked, starving, exhausted, but bizarrely ecstatic anyway. Hm. Intereesttinggg.

REVIEW.

NEXT TIME:

"Do you get a kick out of this, or something?" Tom's voice suddenly burst out angrily from behind her.

She turned to him, not understanding. "What?"

xxx

Chapter Fourteen: A Destructive Charade

“Like, you know, Reeve-” She replayed that one cut-off phrase again and again in her head as she quickly wolfed down her sandwich and hurried back up to her work cubicle. So there was definitely things about Scott’s case that Will Gallantree – and few others – knew about. Things that weren’t printed in the newspapers. Things that she was going to uncover.

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xxx

She was starting to get annoyed now. “Please, Tom?” she asked.

“No – why do we have to?”

“We don’t have to. I want to.”

“That’s you, though, isn’t it? I don’t want to go,” Tom pointed out coldly. “We went there for Christmas. Why can’t we just stay here this time?”

“And do what?” Ginny said incredulously. “Just sit on the sofa and go, ‘oh, Happy New Year’s Eve, by the way’ at midnight?” She rolled her eyes. “Hooray.” She followed him to his desk. “Please? It’ll be fun.”

“I doubt it.”

“Please? Just this once?” she tried. “Grace’ll never forgive me if I don’t go. They’re having a big party. It’ll be so much fun.”

"I'm sorry, Ginevra, if the level of socialising that I can appreciate isn't equal to yours," Tom said scathingly. "You can go by yourself, if you're so desperate to get drunk and watch fireworks."

Ginny stamped her foot. She was acting like a small child, she knew that, but she didn't. Tom was being so irritating. "You're coming," she ground out. "And that's final. You've been such a miserable sod for the past few days, and I don't care if you do have an excuse for it. I'm in the same boat as you are – probably worse, since you're not the one who has to carry the freakin' baby for the majority of a year – but I'm getting on with it!"

"Fine." Tom stalked away to his bedroom to get ready, muttering, "For God's sake," to himself as he went.

Good. Triumphant, Ginny collapsed onto the sofa to wait for him.

xxx

BANG.

Ginny shrieked with excitement, watching hundreds of brightly coloured magical fireworks spin through the air. "Look at that one!" she yelled over the crackles and explosions, even though everyone else could probably see it to; she pointed up at a large orange dragon that had emerged from the fireworks box and swooped up into the air.

BANG. Another went off, this one green – one firework being set off each second, counting sixty seconds down to midnight.

"FIFTY-TWO!" Grace yelled from nearby. Ginny mused that it was probably the first New Year's Eve that they'd known each other where Grace hadn't pretended to be drunk and staggered around getting information out of other wasted people. "FIFTY-ONE!"

The redhead drained her champagne flute and giggled to herself as it filled up again by enchantment. Magic was so amusing.

“FORTY-SIX! FORTY-FIVE!” Jacob, Grace, and Luke, were all trying to out-shout each other. It looked like fun, so Ginny hurried across to them, screaming at the top of her lungs, “FORTY! THIRTY-NINE! THIRTY-EIGHT!”

“Stop it,” said Alden nearby, not even audible, though his disapproving expression and moving lips calculated exactly what he was saying. “You’re going to either destroy all the wildlife in the area, or kill yourselves.”

“New Year’s Resolutions!” Philippa shouted. “Quick! You’ve got thirty seconds to think of them! HURRY!”

Ginny thought hard, her nose screwing up slightly in concentration.

I resolve to make me, Tom, and the baby work out alright, she decided, though she would certainly never say this out-loud, and, as a cover-up, she hollered, “I RESOLVE TO EAT LOTS AND LOTS OF CHOCOLATE!!” At this, everyone cheered.

“TWENTY-FOUR! TWENTY-THREE!” Everyone was bellowing now, most people drunk, all people at least tipsy – except Leah, who was sitting by the oak tree and talking happily to Grace’s still-unnamed cat. “TWENTY-TWO! TWENTY-ONE!”

With every number shouted out, Ginny started jumping enthusiastically up and down. She had no idea, but she did. And it was fun. Some others joined in – mostly Jacob’s friends, who were all completely inebriated – and fell over.

“SEVENTEEN! SIXTEEN! FIFTEEN! FOURTEEN!”

She suddenly looked around, realising that she didn’t know where Tom was. He was missing the start of the New Year. She turned to Alden. “Where’s Tom?” she asked.

“What?” He frowned, straining to hear her over the animated numbers being screeched into the night.

“Where’s Tom?” she shouted.

“SEVEN! SIX! FIVE! FOUR!”

Oh, forget it.

“THREE!” she screamed. “TWO! ONE!”

A champagne bottle somewhere exploded, and the biggest firework of all shattered the night sky. At the sound, Leah started crying, and hugged Grace’s cat tightly. Jacob picked her up and comforted her, while the cat swiftly made its escape, knowing what was good for its health. Ginny cheered, and gave Alden a kiss on the cheek, as everyone turned to give the nearest member of the opposite gender a kiss.

She giggled. “Oops. I probably should have really tried to find Tom for that.”

Alden nodded. “So that’s what you were saying,” he acknowledged. “Sorry – I couldn’t hear anything except a ringing in my ears.” He grinned. “I think Tom’s still in the house.”

Ginny huffed. Party-pooper. She slipped away from the drunken singing of Auld Lang Syne and made her way up the sloping path that cut across Grace’s massive garden, back towards the house.

“Hello?” she called. Alden had been right; there was a slight tone ringing incessantly in her ears as well, like someone constantly playing the triangle. “Tom?”

No-one answered.

She walked through the ground floor of the house, peering into the great number of sitting rooms and studies that littered the huge Hartwin manor. Just as she was getting frustrated and was going to yell, ‘Tom, get your arse out here right now’, she found him sitting silently on a sofa in one of Grace’s numerous living rooms.

“Hey,” she said, crossing the living room and sitting beside him. “Cheer up.”

"You were right," he said, staring blankly straight ahead, his voice flat. "This is fun."

Ginny sighed. Well, he was being sarcastic, so that was a good sign. However, she didn't really want his sarcasm at the moment. She tilted her head back, looking up at the ceiling. "Look, I know that you're just worried about... everything... but it could all be fine, you know."

"Or it could all be horribly wrong."

She sat back up. "It's not that bad," she tried to comfort him. "Cheer up, Tom. It's 1961! It's happy time." She didn't think that having a go at him for missing the fireworks and the champagne would make him feel any better. Anyway, she'd had enough enthusiasm for the both of them.

"I apologise if I'm annoying you by being slightly preoccupied by the fact that there's an very strong probability that in seven months time, our life will be even worse than it already is, because then there'll be one more freak constantly fighting not to kill you," Tom said icily.

Wisely, Ginny chose to ignore the 'life will be even worse than it already is' jab, and instead said, "Wow, you just live off low self-esteem, don't you?"

Tom didn't answer.

"Come on," she implored, "try to enjoy yourself."

"No."

"Well, well, well." Ginny tucked her legs up beneath her on the sofa and then twisted to face him. "Fine. It looks like I'm going to have to make you enjoy yourself."

His eyes snapped over to hers, looking at her for the first time since she'd entered the living room – instantly understanding what she meant. "No."

“Yup.” She leaned slightly forwards to drop a soft kiss on the top of his jaw, next to his ear.

“No, Ginevra.”

He shifted away sideways, but she followed, pushing at his earlobe with her lips, gently biting it-

“Ginevra, stop it.” He sounded as though his annoyance was building towards actual anger, but the effect that his tone of voice had was somewhat spoiled by his slightly laboured breathing.

“Hm?” Her lips traced down his jaw again, murmuring against his skin, her nose grazing his cheek.

“I – stop it-” he tried to pull away again, but then she took the skin of his throat between her teeth, and he gasped, his breathing rough and heavy. “No... don’t...” He dragged in air, his chest heaving, still struggling not to be taken under as easily as this. “No...”

“No?” she said playfully, her eyes flashing up to his flushed, hot face. His top few shirt buttons slid undone with the help of her fingers, and her lips, tongue and teeth trailed lower, across his collarbone. She could feel his blood racing under his skin.

“Don’t,” he groaned, shivering as her lips whispered tormentingly across his ribs, a strained gasp tearing from him. “Please – don’t...”

“Don’t what?”

He let out a low moan, sliding sideways until his back was pressed against the seat of the sofa, letting her kneel over him – giving in. “Don’t stop...”

There was the answer she’d wanted.

She bent down, crushing her lips against his for just the briefest split-second before tracing the tip of her tongue back down to his chest, kissing, biting... and those rapid gasps, that arched spine, those short moans, all told her that he finally was enjoying himself.

Her shirt slipped down her shoulders, buttons separated from button-holes, her skirt riding up; her mouth at the soft skin of his stomach, maybe lower, as his almost-pained moans grew louder, more frequent, more desperate-

“Hey, are you in heeeere- oh God, my eyes!”

Alden’s voice morphed to shock, and there was the quick snap of a door closing again.

Abruptly, Ginny’s lips detached from Tom’s abdomen, and they both sat up straight – leaving her sitting between his hips, in a very awkward position.

“Oops.” She had kind of forgotten where they were.

She looked back at Tom, but he was staring down at the floor, determinedly not meeting her eyes – he was still breathing hard, though, and she decided that it was time to get off him.

They didn’t speak. Ginny stood, re-buttoning her shirt, and tucking it into her skirt as was the style at the time, adjusting her belt, frowning when she had to struggle to clasp the belt over her slowly swelling stomach.

“Do you get a kick out of this, or something?” Tom’s voice suddenly burst out angrily from behind her.

She turned to him, not understanding. “What?”

“Throwing yourself at me all the time-”

“Excuse me?” she echoed, her mouth falling slightly open in disbelief. “I’m not throwing myself at you-”

“It bloody well seems like it,” Tom snapped. “The aftermath of your NEWTs results letter; the poker game; and this? For God’s sake, and you know that it’s the last thing that I want-”

This was ridiculous. Ginny absolutely couldn't believe what she was hearing – a hypocritical analysis of her kissing him. One person couldn't kiss on his or her own, thank you very much.

"You hardly seemed as though you wanted me to stop," she said, her voice flat, bordering on cold.

"Of course I didn't – Jesus, I can't exactly help it!" Tom was suddenly shouting, standing and towering over her. He always was much taller than her, but it was on of the first times since they'd become engaged that she was intimidated by it. "It's not my fault I'm in love with you! If you start undressing yourself on top of me, I hardly have the self-control to tell you to stop, do I?"

"I-"

"Have you ever stopped to consider that maybe – just maybe – if you stopped this whole stupid 'lady of the night' charade, then maybe you wouldn't be fucking pregnant?!"

Ginny didn't move. She just stood stock-still, not breathing; staring at him in a horrified silence, and she swore that her heart had stopped.

Holy crap. He did not just call me a whore.

Too late Tom seemed to realise what he'd said, and he jerked, the deep meaning of his words hitting him. "I... I didn't mean it like that."

She didn't justify this with a response, and instead spun away, disappearing through the closed door from the living room. She would have been alarmed to see a large crowd of her shocked friends standing close to the door and then leap away guiltily, but she had a numb, empty feeling in her chest.

"It's nice to see what respect you all have for my privacy," she said, her voice listless and emotionless.

"I'm really sorry," Alden said quickly, his cheeks darkening with embarrassment. "I tried to stop them, but-"

"It doesn't matter." Ginny pushed a large section of her hair behind her ear, her head ducking slightly with the action. She took a deep, short breath. "Hey, Grace – d'you mind if I stay here tonight?"

"Er, it's fine, yeah." The brunette was quite distinctly red. "Well. Er. I'll go... and tell the house-elves." She used this as an excuse, and slipped away.

"I need to tell Grace something," said Luke, and disappeared.

"Um." Philippa was scarlet. "I... I have to..." she struggled to come up with an excuse. "Bye." She turned and hurried from the hallway.

In the end, only Alden was left standing beside her.

"I'm sorry-" he tried again.

"Just shut up," she said tiredly, not caring that she was being mean to the only person who cared for her discretion, and she left, moving silently up the stairs to Grace's bedroom, leaving a destructive mess in her wake that was becoming more and more likely that she wouldn't be able to fix.

xxx

A/N: Oh no he didn't! XD Two of my friends are doing a Grace-and-Alden and it's depressing. Oh well. And I have a biology test tomorrow. And a Spanish test. And I should be revising. And I'm neglecting my studies to keep you happy. If I end up a hobo sitting in a cardboard box somewhere, I'm blaming you. Every single one of you readers. INCLUDING you. Yes, you. I'm talking to you. Yes, you. I'm-

I've had slightly too much chocolate. It could be due to this that I'm ranting repetitively. Hm. I ran into Supsciously-Tom-esqe-Sixth-Former today. He scratched his nose at me. -swoon- Please review, thank you for reading this far!! :D

NEXT TIME:

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asked coldly, approaching him.

He looked straight ahead, showing no reaction to her appearing beside him. “It’s my baby, too.”

“Oh, are you going to admit it now?” Ginny asked, her voice a mockery of being cheerful, every word dripping venom. “I wonder how long that will last – I daresay it won’t keep up if it’s discovered that I’m lucky enough to be having dear twins-”

Tom’s eyes snapped sideways to hers with the force of a sledgehammer. “That’s not funny.”

She levelled her own icy gaze back at him. “Am I laughing?”

xxx

Chapter Fifteen: Sick

“Have you ever stopped to consider that maybe – just maybe – if you stopped this whole stupid ‘lady of the night’ charade, then maybe you wouldn’t be fucking pregnant?!”

Ginny didn’t move. She just stood stock-still, not breathing; staring at him in a horrified silence, and she swore that her heart had stopped. She left, moving silently up the stairs to Grace’s bedroom, leaving a destructive mess in her wake that was becoming more and more likely that she wouldn’t be able to fix.

xxx

As she pushed through the revolving doors to the St. Mungoes’ waiting room for her scheduled check-up, Ginny’s heart sank to see Tom standing by the wall, leaning back against it and staring blankly forwards.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she asked coldly, approaching him.

He looked straight ahead, showing no reaction to her appearing beside him. “It’s my baby, too.”

“Oh, are you going to admit it now?” Ginny asked, her voice a mockery of being cheerful, every word dripping venom. “I wonder how long that will last – I daresay it won’t keep up if it’s discovered that I’m lucky enough to be having dear twins-”

Tom’s eyes snapped sideways to hers with the force of a sledgehammer. “That’s not funny.”

She levelled her own icy gaze back at him. “Am I laughing?”

No response met her words, and she turned her back on him, moving towards a nearby available seat, and sat heavily in it, folding her arms across her stomach and glaring at her feet.

There was a trail of muted footsteps, and then a shift in the balance of Ginny's chair fabric as someone sank into the seat beside her. "I..." Tom's voice was close to silent. "I'm so sorry for what I said on New Year's Eve. I didn't mean it."

"You know what I think is unfair?" Ginny burst out, turning her face to him. "You are such a hypocrite. I can't get pregnant on my own, you know, and yet you're standing there, having a go at me like Mr. Innocent, like it's my fault that you happened to want me on my birthday. Acting like you're so distressed at the very thought of this baby – when I'm the one who's going to have to carry it for the next seven months, when I'm the one who's going to have to give birth to it, when I'm the one it's going to depend on. And to be honest, I could get on a hell of a lot better without you, instead of having you nearby, but refusing to even look at me."

A lot of people were staring at them now, but Ginny didn't care.

"So you would rather that I leave you on your own?" Tom demanded.

"No," she exclaimed – he was missing the bloody point! "I would rather that you actually try to make this work, for Merlin's sake!"

"It's never going to work."

"...I wasn't talking about the baby, I was talking about us."

Ginny looked up at Tom, and a chill ran through her veins as she saw in his haunted expression all of the things that he wasn't saying. He hadn't been talking about the baby, either.

"Miss Peregrine?"

She glanced across and saw the same nurse that she'd met last time, standing by a pair of double doors, beckoning towards them. She stood up and swiftly followed the nurse, hoping that Tom would be left behind – she cursed his long legs when he kept pace with her easily.

They moved into a small examination room, and Ginny was called upon to again lie on the make-shift bed that looked a lot more like a dentist's chair.

"How many weeks pregnant are you, Miss Peregrine?" the nurse asked, pulling out a clipboard.

"Er... seven, I think."

"Right." The nurse glanced across at Tom. "You can sit down, dear," she pointed out.

He opened his mouth slightly as if to say no, but then seemed to think better of it, and then dropped into the chair next to Ginny's 'bed', his breathing short with anxiety and anticipation; this was the check-up that would change their lives.

"Drink this, Miss Peregrine." Ginny was presented with a small goblet filled almost to the brim with a thick, see-through something – it looked like liquid glass. Nervously, she lifted it to her lips. It was completely tasteless; like water, but closer to gelatine in its syrupy thickness.

"Okay – would you mind pulling up your shirt, please?" the nurse asked, taking her wand from her pocket.

Her heart going a thousand miles an hour, she tugged the material of her light green shirt higher above her stomach, and tried not to twitch or fidget as the nurse prepared whatever spell she was going to be doing.

"Hold still..." the nurse pointed her wand at Ginny's stomach-

Lavender light flashed, scarring purple momentarily onto the back of Ginny's retinas, and she automatically grabbed Tom's hand, clinging to him, no longer caring what arguments they'd had. They were in this together now.

Then it was over – that quickly – and the nurse took a small vial from a cupboard above Tom's head. She held the tip of her wand inside

the vial, and a thin silvery substance flowed from the wood, into the glass. "I'll be back in a moment," she said, and then bustled from the examination room.

Ginny knew that she was still tightly grasping Tom's hand, but she made no move to let go. His fingers curled around hers, too, and for a never-ending period of space, they waited.

Thirty seconds.

One minute.

Five minutes.

Tom's breathing was still heavy with apprehension, and Ginny was fairly certain that she was close to hyperventilating as well.

Oh my God, how long does it have to take?

"Here we are then," said the nurse, returning through the door, with a broad smile on her face. She held in her hands a small transparent screen, which she set up on the wall, similar to a Muggle X-ray, and then, with a flick of her wand at the ceiling, the lights turned off and they were plunged into darkness – the only light coming from the screen, which was no longer transparent... it was an enlarged, green-tinged, blurry image of...

Well, Ginny couldn't see a baby, but she guessed that it was what she was supposed to be seeing. She felt guilty. Was she a bad mother because she couldn't see her baby?

"Do you see that?" the nurse said happily.

No, Ginny whined silently. No, I don't. What's happening?

All of a sudden, Tom wasn't clinging to her hand anymore. His fingers were limp and dead through hers. He stared straight ahead at the screen, no longer breathing at all.

“Um.” She cleared her throat awkwardly, feeling ashamed of herself. “I can’t see anything.”

“Of course – don’t worry, it’s not always easy to tell...” the nurse shifted to the front of the room, and pointed the tip of her wand at part of the image... it looked like a wiggly line, sort of distorted, and not really holding much of a human shape. “Do you see these two separate bumps?”

“Yeah...” Ginny frowned. No offence, but her baby looked kind of mutated. Then, in a flash of lightning, she understood – she understood the image, she understood Tom’s reaction... her mouth fell open. “Oh my God.”

“Congratulations,” beamed the nurse, very pleased with herself. “I’m proud to say that you’ll be having two healthy tw-”

Before the word was even finished, Ginny felt a harsh, almost painful jerk on her hand as Tom ripped away from her, and by the time she looked over at where he had been sitting, there was the loud slam of a door closing.

She tried to remember how to breathe.

“Er. Is everything alright?” the nurse asked hesitantly.

“Thank you for your time,” said Ginny shakily, not answering the question. No, everything is not alright. She stood up, her shirt falling back over her stomach, and then she left the room as fast as possible, finding her way to the reception in a blur.

She pushed past a group of small old ladies to the front desk, shoving her hair out of her face to demand, “Have you seen my fiancé?”

“Well, I really don’t know-”

“The one I was shouting at earlier!” she snapped, losing what little patience she already had. “You were one of the people staring at us, for God’s sake – you know who he is. Tall! Dark-haired! Have you seen him?”

“I’m afraid not, but perhaps if you-”

Ginny tipped her head back with a groan. This was bad. Damn. He always did a disappearing act, and she hated it. She spun and hurried to the Apparation centre.

Crack.

With her shoulder, she rammed open the door marked 21-5D, and searched through their apartment. There was no sign of Tom, or of him having been there since they had left to St. Mungoes’. She swore under her breath, and went back outside of the Apparating wards again, not knowing where she was going until she had already vanished.

Crack.

She appeared in front of Alden’s parents’ house – he was still living with them while he got the money to buy his own place – and just about smashed the door down with her fist.

The wooden door swung open after a moment that crawled by in slow-motion. “Ginny, how good to see you-”

“Is Alden in?” she asked. “Sorry – it’s important.”

Mrs. Philips seemed to see the desperate, troubled expression cutting through Ginny’s usually friendly face, and swivelled to call up the stairs. “Alden!”

Her friend came quickly down the numerous wooden stairs, curly hair damp, towel in hand. “Hey,” he said, and then he, too, caught sight of her upset face. “What’s wrong?”

“Do you know where Tom is?”

“... Why would I?”

“Do you know where he is?” She was this close to grabbing his shoulders and shaking him until he came up with something useful, but she calmed herself with deep breaths.

“No – sorry. Have you tried at your own apartment yet?” Alden proposed.

“Of course I’ve bloody tried where we live!” Even though, technically, she hadn’t lived there for a week since New Year’s Eve.

“I don’t know where else to suggest, then. Why? Ginny, what the hell is happening?”

“What do you think is happening?” Ginny cried out. “He’s missing!” Then, like a light switching on, her attention was lost. “I could look at Flourish and Blott’s. He might have... he might have gone to read something.” It was a stupid idea, but it was better than wandering around all of the United Kingdom.

“Yeah...” Alden looked a bit thrown off balance. “He might have randomly gone to read something. You know, when you run away, what else is there to do?”

She ignored his sarcastic comment, and focused – Determination, Destination, Deliberation – on Flourish and Blott’s.

Crack.

“Is Tom here?” she asked as soon as she pushed through the big glass doors to the bookshop; her loud voice made a child jump, and an elderly man shushed her disapprovingly. “Riddle. Tom Riddle.”

Someone dressed in the standard Flourish and Blott’s helper uniform turned to her, a stack of books up to his chin. “He hasn’t been into work for days.”

Ginny’s heart sank. “Is he here now, though?”

The man gave her a look as though she was very stupid. “No...” he said, slowly, his expression reading the words, are you a total imbecile, or what? When I say he’s not here... he’s not here.

Not saying anything in response to his obvious silent cynicism, despite her brain coming up with a hundred witty retorts to say, she pushed back through the doors, and scanned hazel eyes up and down Diagon Alley.

As she knew that Tom didn’t like the crowds in Diagon Alley, she doubted that he would be here without reason – such as working – and yet, despite this, she hurried up and down the street, not caring when she twisted her ankle on the uneven road, glancing into each shop that she passed.

This is ridiculous, she finally realised with a heavy sigh as she neared Gringott’s. I should have just waited in the apartment – he has to go back there at some point, and it would have saved me a lot of trouble.

She looked across at a grand clock displayed on the roof of Madam Malkin’s. Forty minutes had passed since Tom had abruptly left St. Mungoes’. She was slightly surprised. It had only felt like five or ten minutes.

Either way, the time didn’t matter. She fixed her thoughts on the Redrick apartment block, fifth-floor, 21-5D, and Apparated.

The door of what she could consider home (even though she’d not lived there in a week, and she’d only been living there a few months before that) wavered into view, and she slipped through.

A mix of emotions flooded her when she entered the apartment, as the first thing that she noticed that was different from when she had looked here earlier was that Tom was pacing the living room. Every feeling that swelled inside her was strong – relief, because he was safe; sadness, because it was now confirmed that his supernatural problem would be passed on – but they were all overwhelmed by concern when she saw how panicked he was.

“Tom?” she called worriedly, hanging up her coat, wondering what was wrong.

At her voice, he started; he’d been so deep in his panic that he hadn’t even noticed her come in, which was unusual in itself, as she was an obnoxiously noisy person. He was breathing very rapidly, literally teetering on the fine line that defined severe hyperventilation. His hair was sticking up at all odd angles, evidence that he had been raking his hands through it, an anxious trait that she was familiar with.

“What’s wrong?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, his breathing became quicker and quicker; he pushed his hands through his hair again, but this time curled his fingers, tightly holding onto his skull.

Ginny’s worry gave way to fear. She hadn’t seen him like this... ever. It was frightening her. “Tom,” she said, moving closer and resting a hand on his elbow, but he jumped back as though he had been burned, tripping over the corner of the coffee, but regaining his balance, twining his arms tightly around his stomach, similar to what one would do if they felt terribly sick.

“How can you stand to be anywhere near me?” he whispered, wrenching at her heart with the level of actual pain in his slightly Scottish-accented voice.

Is this all just because of the twins thing?

She couldn’t understand. Surely she should be taking it worse than him... yet though there was a numbness in her that would probably give way to feeling horrified at some point in the future when reality sank in, she was fine.

There was a sudden loud knock on the door, which caused Tom, still hyperventilating, to jump again. Ginny cast him one worried glance before going to answer the door.

It was Grace... except that her personality was shattered. There was no bubbly friendliness, no broad smile, no twinkle in her eyes. Tears

streamed freely down her face, and every inhalation or exhalation was a loud, strangled sob. “Ginny-”

“Oh my God, what’s wrong?” Ginny was alarmed. Everyone was breaking down around her within the same hour. She usually had this many people lose control in several years.

“P-Pippa – they found Pippa - she’s dead!” she choked out, her face screwing up as she was once more overcome by tears.

Ginny froze.

Her brain had completely shut down, and yet somehow she was able to say to Grace, “Can I talk to you later? I’m sorry – I’ll come over to your house.”

Grace nodded miserably, tears splashing down the front of her blouse, and she Disapparated, leaving a stunned Ginny staring out of the front door.

Tom was no longer hyperventilating. He wasn’t breathing at all. There was total silence.

Very slowly, Ginny closed the front door, and then turned back to face Tom. “You didn’t,” she said quietly, her voice shaking slightly. “Tell me you didn’t.”

“I...” Tom’s voice was strained. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“...Because... because...” He dragged his hands over his face in anguish, and groaned. “Because it wouldn’t be true.”

Even though she’d already suspected it, pain drove a nail through her, and she dragged in a gasp of horror. “TOM!”

“I didn’t mean to-” he started desperately, his face crumpling, and it was one of the first times that she had ever seen him so close to breaking down completely.

“She’s one of my best friends, Tom!”

“I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“The fact that you killed her by accident doesn’t undo the fact that you killed her!” Ginny cried, tears starting up and weaving through her eyelashes.

“I’m so sorry-” Tom stammered, torn by distress. “I didn’t – I just – she was there – and I couldn’t – I didn’t mean to-”

“And you didn’t mean to kill Scott, either?” she challenged, her voice nearing a sob.

At this accusation, Tom merely looked bewildered. “...Scott?”

“SCOTT REEVE,” she shouted.

“What – you – you think that I’m the one who’s ‘killed’ him – who’s ‘kidnapped’ him?” he said, for the most part incredulous, but levelled with horror and anger.

“Why the hell not you? You’ve never liked him-”

“Sorry for disliking the person whose idiotic actions ended up sending me to Azkaban!” Tom snarled.

“-and if you haven’t,” Ginny continued, ignoring what he’d said, “then what’s the bloody point in having so many newspaper clippings about him stashed away? Why are you trying to hide the details from me before?”

“I was trying to protect your feelings, so that you wouldn’t-”

“I’ve heard this excuse before!” She was crying full-out now, her voice barely keeping control, tears rolling down her freckled cheeks. “And it doesn’t work! Because most of the articles are WEEKS after I found out!”

“Please - it wasn’t me-”

“That’s not an explanation of the newspaper articles!” she yelled.

“It was force of habit,” Tom said, pain written plainly across his face. “After so long, I just got used to taking out whatever I read in the Prophet about Reeve – it wasn’t deliberate at all-”

“Oh, how convenient,” she bit out, her eyes narrowed.

“It wasn’t me!” Tom shouted.

“How can I possibly try and believe that?”

“Because you know that I would tell you! Unlike you, I tell you everything! I wouldn’t hide the fact that I’d killed someone! Just like Decrow, I-”

“DON’T YOU DARE MENTION PIPPA,” Ginny screamed, suddenly turning on him.

“Okay, okay,” Tom backtracked, taking a step backwards. “I won’t – I’m sorry – I– just listen to me. I didn’t attack Reeve. I didn’t-”

“Tell that to the mountain of evidence!” she sobbed.

“WHY DON’T YOU TRUST ME?”

“Because it’s becoming fucking impossible to trust you! It’s impossible to know which of your stories to believe – one day, I’m beautiful, the next day, I’m a bloody whore, according to you! One day, you’re innocent, and then the next thing I know, you’ve – you’ve – you’ve killed Pippa!”

“Then don’t believe me!” he bellowed. “Don’t believe a word I say! Disregard everything that comes out of my mouth! Disbelieve that I love you, disbelieve that I want to marry you – if you want! Just believe me this once – I didn’t kill Reeve. Please, I’m certain-”

“You can’t promise, you can’t swear, you can’t guarantee – you’re just certain? That’s all? Why are you certain?”

“I... I...” Tom hesitated, not breathing for a moment of anticipation while he tried not to speak. “I... I can’t remember it.”

“Of course you don’t! Because you did it!”

“No, I-”

“You can’t just-”

“WHY AREN’T YOU LISTENING TO ME?!” Tom suddenly roared.

“You’re not saying anything that’s worth me hearing,” Ginny said icily.

“Of course not,” Tom hissed, furious. “Of course not! You never listen to anything except what you want to hear! You see everything your way and won’t even contemplate that you might be wrong!” His voice was steadily getting louder and more angry. “You’ve got such tunnel vision that it’s almost ridiculous! Everything’s always got to be about you!”

“How has this suddenly changed to having a go at me?” She couldn’t believe it. She wasn’t the person who was in the wrong here! She wasn’t the one who was causing all of the problems!

“Because I’m sick of it, and-”

“You’re sick of it?” Ginny raged. “Do you want to know what I’m sick of? I’m sick of being pregnant – I’m sick of it being my fault – I’m sick of you ignoring me because you can’t handle it – I’m sick being called a goddamn whore, for Christ’s sake! I’m sick of everything – I’m sick of you – I’m sick of having to make excuses for you all the time – I’m sick of you going around killing people-”

“Shut up.” Tom’s voice had dropped to sub-zero temperatures that she hadn’t heard in years. It sent a shiver down her spine. “That is not fair.”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” Ginny snapped, even though she knew deep down that the last point of her rant had overstepped the mark.

“That doesn’t give you the right to have a go at me about it – it’s not my fucking fault!” he bellowed.

“Nothing’s your fault these days, is it?” Ginny screamed. “You’re Mr. Guiltless in all of this! It’s not your fault I’m pregnant, it’s not your fault that two of my best friends are dead, it’s not your fault that my life is now just about over-”

And then he hit her.

Ginny stared sideways at the spot her eyes had landed upon when her head turned with the strike, not able to believe what had just happened.

“Fuck. Oh, fuck – I - I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

“You piece,” she said, turning back to face him slowly, one cheek bright red, “of shit.”

“I’m so sorry-”

“I don’t want to hear it.” She grabbed her coat from the cupboard by the door, not staying long enough even to slip it over her shoulders. By impulse, she also snatched the striped scarf that he’d given her for Christmas, but then thought better of it. She screwed it up into a ball and threw it at him. “Burn in hell.”

She walked away.

xxx

A/N: Haha. It’s getting worse and worse. I read somewhere that relationships generally started deteriorating after about two years, so I thought, hey, what the heck. Yay! Angstiness! Someone said that pregnant people aren’t supposed to have alcohol, but Ginny’s still young and sort of reckless and she doesn’t know any better. :D –gets defensive-

Anyway, please review! Sorry for the late chapter. Hopefully the next one won't be too far behind schedule.

NEXT TIME:

The uniform door of the Redrick Apartment block appeared in front of her, and she glanced sideways only briefly to check that no-one had seen her arrive out of thin air, and then opened the door with her own keys, which she hadn't used in several days.

Sitting on the sofa was Tom, staring forwards and not seeming to be much else. He looked as though he'd been doing that for quite some time. When she came in, his eyes moved from the wall in front of him to her – not looking particularly taken aback at her being there. There was a worn, tired expression on his face similar to one found of the face of someone just recovering from an illness.

Xxx

Chapter Sixteen: For Once

And then he hit her. Ginny stared sideways at the spot her eyes had landed upon when her head turned with the strike, not able to believe what had just happened. “Fuck. Oh, fuck – I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to-”

“You piece,” she said, turning back to face him slowly, one cheek bright red, “of shit.”

“I don’t want to hear it.” She grabbed her coat from the cupboard by the door, not staying long enough even to slip it over her shoulders. By impulse, she also snatched the striped scarf that he’d given her for Christmas, but then thought better of it. She screwed it up into a ball and threw it at him. “Burn in hell.” She walked away.

xxx

Time went on without Tom. Even though, deep down, she felt as though life shouldn’t continue without him, Ginny kept going.

She hadn’t strictly moved out of his apartment – but she hadn’t spoken to him in the week since Philippa’s death, and had been staying at Grace’s house for that time. They hadn’t broken up either, that much was certain, as Grace’s determined efforts at organising the wedding continued, even though she suddenly found that she had a lot more work to do, as the other half of the wedding-planner duo had disappeared from the picture.

“Hold still,” said Grace through a mouthful of pins, experimenting with different ways to attach sheets of white veil (painfully) to Ginny’s head. “Hold still!”

“Ow,” Ginny mumbled as she was stabbed in the head. “Okay, you don’t have to get vicious.”

Both of the two girls were living normally without Philippa, though there a numb, empty feeling deep in their stomachs, and her name was never mentioned. They knew about the plans for the funeral, and

though Grace had offered to help organise it, her ideas were never discussed with anyone except Mr. and Mrs. Decrow.

“How do you want it attached to your head?” Grace asked. “Like, with a hairband, or clips, or flowers, or just by magic, or what?”

“I don’t know.” Ginny flinched away from a pin that was presently being jabbed into her skull. “Ow. Whichever is the least painful.”

“Well, you have to decide. Oh!” Grace suddenly gasped, the loud noise startling Ginny into jerking backwards, and having the brunette’s entire handful of pins spear the side of her head. “Or I could just start on the dress first, and then make the veil match.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Ginny, holding a hand to her ear, where she had been stabbed.

“The dress will be harder though – but I can get the measurements today-”

Ginny took her fingers from her ear and saw blood. “...Grace?”

“-but then I really need to get on with designing it. I think you’d look really nice with lots of lace and-”

“Grace, I’m bleeding.”

“-maybe some frills as well, but I doubt that you would let me cover you in frills, so maybe just the lace, but then I could cut some frills into your veil or something or have a massively long frilly train-”

“Grace?”

“-but knowing how clumsy you are, you’d probably fall face-first into the aisle, so the only view that Romeo would get of you would probably be your bum sticking up in the air – I know! I could put frills on your back, so that even if you do fall over, you’ll still be able to-”

“GRACE!”

“Hm?” Finally she paid attention. “What?”

“You’ve impaled my ear.” Ginny’s hand was now dripping blood onto her shirt. “Help.”

“Oh. Whoops.” Grace flushed red, and hastily began to remove the pins from Ginny’s ear, flicking her wand and healing it again. Ginny would have done it herself, but she had never been particularly good at Healing, and was worried that she might just blast half of her head away by accident. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” the other girl said wearily. “Just don’t drown me out when I’m bleeding copiously from the head.”

“You were fine,” Grace scoffed, but she stopped measuring Ginny and began to discuss the other aspects of the wedding. “You need to give me a song-list of the songs you want played for the party afterwards.”

“There’s going to be a party?”

“Duh. Obvious much.”

“Okay. Er. Maybe some Kids In Glass Cauldrons stuff. I don’t know.” Ginny twitched her shoulders in a small shrug. “Whatever. You know what music I like; you decide.”

“Well, fine.” Grace grabbed a piece of parchment and a quill and scrawled down something. “Can you get me the Kids In Glass Cauldrons album, anyway? I want to use it for... you know.” She trailed off. “Pippa.”

The redhead bit her lip. “Oh.” She nodded, as a pang of guilt went through her stomach, thinking of Tom. “Alright.”

“When can you get it for me?”

“Er. I can get after work on Monday, if you want.”

“...Um... actually...” Grace hesitated, wiggling her quill between her fingers. “...how does now work for you?”

Surprised, Ginny merely blinked at her friend. “Now?”

“Yeah.” Grace then launched into a huge explanation. “Firstly, I really need that record, and secondly, this professional designer person is coming in about,” she glanced at her pocket-watch, “seven minutes – and I don’t want you to be here. I want your dress to be a surprise.”

“I’ll just hide in your bedroom.” Ginny was desperate not to go to her and Tom’s apartment. “I won’t listen to what you’re saying.”

“Please?”

Ginny twisted her hands together. “I...” she struggled to come up with an excuse as to why she couldn’t go, but save for telling Grace everything, she couldn’t think of anything to say. “Fine,” she reluctantly agreed.

“Thank you!” Grace gave her a big hug, and then went downstairs with her, towards the front door, so that Ginny could Apparate. “I’ll see you... in about an hour?”

“It won’t take me that long to get a record!”

“But that’s how long my meeting is!” Grace’s face fell. “Walk back to your apartment, then.”

“We’re in Hertfordshire! I can’t walk.”

“Pick the record up very slowly. Almost as in slow-motion. Walk backwards through your apartment. Get the bus. I don’t know.”

Ginny heaved a sigh. “Okay, okay. I’m going.”

With only Grace’s triumphant smile to make her feel as though doing this was in any way a positive thing, Ginny pushed through the front door, jogged down the few steps onto the garden path, and then vanished.

The uniform door of the Redrick Apartment block appeared in front of her, and she glanced sideways only briefly to check that no-one had seen her arrive out of thin air, and then opened the door with her own keys, which she hadn't used in several days.

Sitting on the sofa was Tom, staring forwards and not seeming to be much else. He looked as though he'd been doing that for quite some time. When she came in, his eyes moved from the wall in front of him to her – not looking particularly taken aback at her being there. There was a worn, tired expression on his face similar to one found on the face of someone just recovering from an illness, shadows smeared under his eyes.

"Oh." Ginny's face was heating up. "Hi. I'm just getting my Kids In Glass Cauldrons album." Even though it was now as much her apartment as his, she felt as though she needed an explanation for being there. "She wants to play it at... at Pippa's funeral."

Tom stood, almost shakily. "I'm so unbelievably sorry." He didn't even bother with greeting her.

Feeling awkward, Ginny shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "It doesn't matter," she mumbled. "It's not your fault." She knew the guilt now that was piling onto her for her accusations. "You didn't hurt her on purpose."

He took a deep breath, taking a few steps towards her. "I'm... I'm sorry about Philippa, as well... but I – I meant..." He didn't finish his sentence; he just hesitantly reached out and touched her face.

Even though it wasn't red anymore and it certainly didn't hurt, Ginny couldn't help but flinch slightly when his cold fingertips brushed her cheek.

"I have been a piece of shit for the past two months, and I'm sorry," he said, his voice strangled. "I just..." his breath rushed out as he tried and failed to find the words. "Everything is crazy right now – and, please understand that it is not the baby in itself that I so strongly dislike... it's the fact that it's going to be a baby that is, without a

doubt, going to try and kill you. And..." he seemed to be in pain, merely saying this: "...and even if I want to be, I can't always be here to protect you."

"I think I can protect myself against a baby, you know," Ginny said, trying to keep her tone hard and unforgiving – a failing effort.

"A baby isn't always going to be a baby though," he pointed out, and heaved a rough sigh. "Ginevra... I love you – and the thought of you being hurt because of something I did, something I – I-" Words failed him here as well, and he fell silent for a moment. "When we were playing poker, and you took ill – yes, I know that I overreacted, but you have no idea of the absolute terror that went through me when you collapsed. I thought..." he swallowed, hard. "I thought that it was already killing you. In front of me."

Tears that Ginny blamed entirely on her stupid hormonal pregnancy were choking her throat now.

"I'm sorry," she said, and stepped forwards to hug him... not wrapping her arms around him particularly tightly; just resting the side of her face against his chest and listening to him breathe, the quiet thud of his heartbeat going against her ear. She'd missed this.

"So am I," Tom murmured. "Anything I have said or done in the past few weeks I assure you I did not mean." A short sigh ruffled her red hair. "I love you. And..."

Not sure what was happening, Ginny just watched as he pulled gently away from her arms, and then ducked down to the height of her stomach. His eyes flickered up to hers anxiously, and then he rested a tentative hand on her belly.

"...I..." His voice was barely audible now. "I love you, too." Here he took a deep breath, which almost sounded painful; forced the next words out with some difficulty, his breath restricted in his throat, his forehead screwing up slightly in the effort of making himself say: "...Both of you."

I hate being pregnant, she thought as a large quantity of tears built up in her eyes again.

Then, to her alarm, Tom suddenly gave a small yelp and jumped backwards, one hand frozen in air, having yanked it away from Ginny very quickly. He just stared at her stomach, bewilderment written across his face.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked, confused and self-conscious.

He didn't look up at her face. He was suspiciously eyeing her stomach as though it was something dangerous. "Something moved."

Laughter burst out of Ginny. And to think that she'd been worried that something was wrong. "You doofus," she giggled. "That's normal. That's the baby."

Tom frowned, looking dubious as he took in this new information. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Oh."

He considered this for a second, and then warily approached her, lifting his hand to her stomach again. It was funny for Ginny to see him so apprehensive of the baby (babies, she reminded herself) moving, when she had become used to it to the point that she barely even noticed it anymore.

However, she paid attention to the baby's kicking, and grinned to see that its next movement was perfectly in time with Tom's hand twitching slightly away from her. Then a tiny smile broke out on his face. "Hello," he said quietly, tilting his head to one side. "I know you. Do you know me?"

"I should hope so," Ginny said teasingly.

He looked up at her, his smile increasing in size at her light-hearted response, and it made Ginny feel as though she was flying. It had

been a while since she'd seen him so happy. Carefully, he lifted the material of her shirt and touched his lips to her ballooned stomach; a shiver danced down her spine.

And for once, everything was alright.

xxx

A/N: Yeah, I decided not to make them fight for too long. They've fallen drastically apart enough times. :D Aw. This trilogy is making me really depressed, because, after all, it's just a story, and no-one ever gets their fairy-tale endings outside of stories. Ah well. Make me feel better with reviews, maybe? –hint- xx

NEXT TIME:

“Ginevra? Are you okay? What’s wrong? Ginevra? What’s – GINEVRA!”

Her eyes snapped open, and, through the gloom of night-time, she could make out the strong, pale face of Tom Riddle, etched with concern. “Tom!” she cried, throwing her arms around him and hugging him tightly, crying into his shoulder.

Xxx

Chapter Seventeen: Stir It Up

However, she paid attention to the baby's kicking, and grinned to see that its movement was perfectly in time with Tom's hand twitching slightly away from her. Then a small smile broke out on his face. "Hello," he said quietly, tilting his head to one side. "I know you. Do you know me?" He looked up at her, his smile increasing in size at her light-hearted response, and it made Ginny feel as though she was flying. It had been a while since she'd seen him so happy. Carefully, he lifted the material of her shirt and touched his lips to her ballooned stomach; a shiver danced down her spine.

And for once, everything was alright.

xxx

The aisle stretched out miles and miles ahead, music softly playing, and everyone in the hundreds of benches turned in their seats to see her. Ginny couldn't see her reflection in anything nearby, but she could feel the white satin against her skin and she knew that she was beautiful.

"Careful, Ginny, don't fall over, now," said a familiar voice beside her, a warm hand gripping her elbow. Ginny, startled, turned to who had spoken, and saw Arthur Weasley beside her, tears in his eyes as he prepared to give away his only daughter.

"Dad," she gasped, tears springing to her eyes. But... her father was dead... wasn't he?

"What's wrong?" Arthur looked concerned. "No – don't cry, darling. You're beautiful, and beautiful girls don't cry, do they?" Chuckling, he lifted a hand to brush away the tears. "Let's turn off this leaky tap, then." It was what he'd always said when she started to cry; ever since she was a baby.

"Are you real?" Ginny couldn't believe it. It was too good to be true.

"Real?" Arthur smiled. "Of course I'm real, sweetheart. Honestly – the things you sometimes come up with."

“Promise me that you’re real,” she whispered. “Please.”

“I promise,” Arthur vowed sombrely. “Now. Are you ready to go?”

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she nodded, and they set off down the aisle. The effort of not crying was made more difficult by a hundred-fold when she saw Molly Weasley sobbing into a handkerchief – Fred and George mouthing, ‘whatever you do, don’t drink the punch’ and winking – Hermione beaming with pride, Ron’s arm around her – Harry and Luna cuddled together, a sight that no longer hurt, both of them grinning for her – Percy – Charlie – Bill – Fleur –

They’re all here, she thought. Just like I wanted them to be.

It was strange, though. Something was missing. She scanned the crowd for the tearful face of Grace, or Alden’s smile, or... or anyone. It was too crowded in the room to find them, and she decided that she would look for them later. They would be the first to greet her.

They were reaching the end of the long aisle, and Arthur lightly kissed on her forehead, before letting her go... letting her slip away from home.

Ecstatic tears in her eyes at everything she’d always wanted coming true, Ginny finally turned to her waiting fiancé... Her brow furrowed in confusion. She spun back to face the vast room full of her waiting family and friends. “Where’s Tom?” she asked.

Some people frowned.

“Tom – Tom Riddle,” she clarified, thinking that they were all pretty stupid if they didn’t even know the name of the groom.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of this.” Harry stood, and approached her, taking her hands, a soft and comforting look in his green eyes. “It’s okay, Ginny. It was eight years ago. It’s okay now. He’s gone. You can move on.”

“No – no!” Ginny cried. “Not the diary Tom – just – Tom! Tom Riddle – where is he?!” Despair rose up inside her as she understood. It wasn’t real. None of it was real. She turned on Arthur Weasley. “You promised!” she screamed, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You promised you were real! YOU PROMISED!”

It was one or the other. Tom or her family.

She could never have both.

“You promised!” she screamed, sobbing uncontrollably into her pillow. “You – you – promised-”

“Ginevra? Are you okay? What’s wrong? Ginevra? What’s – GINEVRA!”

Her eyes snapped open, and, through the gloom of night-time, she could make out the strong, pale face of Tom Riddle, etched with concern. “Tom!” she cried, throwing her arms around him and hugging him tightly, crying into his shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, sounding completely bewildered as he held her and tried to console her.

“I want my family – they promised – they told me – they said – promised,” she sobbed. “They promised!”

“Who promised?” Tom was still struggling to comprehend what was happening.

“My dad,” she whispered tearfully, pulling back from his shoulder to look up into his eyes, her face crumpled with sadness. “He – he promised that – that – he was r-real and – he promised-”

“Oh...” he said, understanding that she was babbling about a dream. He took her back in his arms. “It’s okay. Don’t worry, it’s okay.”

“No-one’s going to be there,” she wept. “My dad – and my mum – and – and – Ron – and Hermione – and Harry – and my mum – and I want my mum there – and Scott and Pippa – but I can’t...” Her

breathing was coming in loud, strangled sobs. It was like losing them all over again. "I'll have to walk down the aisle by myself – and – and no-one will give me away – and I'll just be – they – they promised-"

"Sssh, it's okay," Tom murmured, hugging her, pushing her untidy hair away, kissing her face, using his cool thumbs to smudge the tears away.

xxx

The next Monday came, and Ginny was back at work. Beth and Louise excitedly counted down twenty-four days left until the wedding, spending a great more deal of time on looking at dresses and shoes than they should have. Almost everything had been decided by Grace, and Ginny had absolutely no idea of anything except that her best friends were going to kidnap her and do everything else for her. Will Gallantree had asked if he was invited – she had no idea how he knew about her wedding – adding up the numbers of guests to thirty-five, including numerous people who she hadn't spoken to in a long time, such as Heather Tristanebury and Eleanor Fionn. It was small, admittedly, but cosy.

She and Will talked occasionally (much to Louise's mingled delight and envy), and had no issues with one another, though they weren't particularly. Ginny couldn't help but feel awkward around him; the only reason that she had ever approached him to make an effort at being friends was so that she could find out about Scott's disappearance, and now...

Well. Now she wasn't sure. She had decided that she didn't really want to know. She wanted to believe Tom and didn't like the idea of the two of them having trust issues. She was perfectly happy pretending that Scott and Philippa were merely on holiday, and that the growing bump under her shirt was just the after-effects of too many slices of banana-bread.

As she doodled in the corner of her parchment, Ginny mused back on said banana-bread bump. Three and a half months. Ten weeks. Seventeen weeks left. It seemed an annoyingly long time to wait, and yet in her uncertainty she partly wanted it to be even longer.

“Ginny?”

Surprised at a voice behind her, the redhead turned in her chair, the tip of her quill wedged between her teeth. “Hm?” The sight of Louise Armstrong standing at the entrance to Ginny’s work cubicle, tugging at the material of her cardigan sleeves and twisting her blonde hair back and forth, met her. “Hi, Lou.”

“Someone’s here to see you,” Louise murmured, looking distinctly pink and flustered – something that usually only occurred when Will Gallantree was in the vicinity, and as far as Ginny was aware, he was not. “They asked me where you worked.”

“Oh.” A small frown was the response to this. “Er. Okay. Thanks.” She had little idea of who could be randomly turning up to visit her at work. Perhaps it was Tom. Perhaps it was important.

And then Bernard Terby appeared.

Ginny’s eyes widened, her jaw dropping. “Bernard!” she cried, standing as Louise cast one final look of longing at the student’s beautiful face before leaving. “What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

He had been smiling, but for a split-second his expression hardened, his eyes tight and cold, to accompany the muted venom in his voice when he muttered, “Don’t patronise me” – and then, just as quickly, his face was completely pleasant and happy to see her. “I’m on a brief holiday of sorts,” he explained.

“Oh, okay.” Ginny mimed wiping her brow with the back of her hand, relieved. “I was worried that I was going to be attacked by Dippet for kidnapping you.” She grinned, joyous that Bernard no longer was ignoring her. “So what makes you come here?”

Bernard shrugged lightly, the movement flicking some of his shiny brown hair into his green eyes. Ginny forced herself to concentrate on the conversation and not on him, and also made sure that none of her

awe at how pretty he was turned up in her thoughts – she hadn't forgotten that he read minds.

"I heard that you worked here – I was in the area, and I just wanted to say hello..." he said flippantly. "And also..." He gave her a benevolent, rueful smile. "I wanted to offer my sympathy."

Confused, Ginny just looked up at him, aware that he seemed to be growing still while she stayed short. "What? – Oh!" Her heart sank. "You mean... Pippa, right?" She had difficulty saying the ex-Ravenclaw's name, as a wound in her heart was tugged open.

"Pippa?" Now Bernard was the one who was bewildered.

"Philippa Decrow," Ginny said. She couldn't help but wonder that if he had not meant his sympathy for Philippa, what he possibly could mean. "One of my best friends. She was in Ravenclaw. The dark-haired one. She..." swallowing hard, she struggled to make herself say it: "She... died. A few weeks ago."

In less than a moment, something disturbing and sinister flashed through Bernard's eyes... like a wild glee. It reminded her of his dark expression when he had said 'don't patronise me' a few minutes previously. It was alarming. Just as quickly, the malice was gone, and he assumed a face suitable for the topic of death.

"I'm so sorry," he said humbly. "I didn't know." He sighed, sticking his hands into the pockets of what looked to be an expensive jacket. "Shame about Reeve..." he said softly. "Shame about Riddle, too."

Ginny looked at him sharply. "Tom?" She didn't recall there being anything wrong with her fiancé... every conversation that she and Bernard had shared flooded back to her – almost all revolving around how, supposedly, she and Tom weren't right for each other. "What about Tom?"

It became truly apparent now that the younger Slytherin's consideration and kindness was a façade, and one that he could no longer keep up. He chuckled, shaking his head as though in disbelief.

“What, you mean you haven’t worked out who killed your precious Reeve? I thought you liked being the detective, the good guy.”

Her heart stopped.

“No,” Ginny said, too loudly. She was having trouble controlling herself. “No. It wasn’t him.” She took deep breaths to steady herself, gripping the back of her chair behind her. “Tom didn’t kill Scott. It – it wasn’t him. I know that it wasn’t. He told me.”

Bernard tilted one sleek eyebrow at her. “Of course that’s what he tells you...”

Breathing was rough in her lungs as she tried to make sense of everything being thrown at her now. Bernard read minds. He could see into Tom’s head. He knew the truth.

No! Stop it! She was being stupid. He wouldn’t lie to her. He wouldn’t do that. She and Tom had already had enough problems and arguments. No, he wouldn’t lie to her.

What if she had continued to investigate Scott’s case via Will Gallantree? What would she had discovered? That Scott’s body had been found – savaged, with a bloody knife like the one that Tom’s alter-ego usually favoured, his lips twisted into a scream, maybe a name, one last name before he died, the name of his killer... ‘Tom’?

“Get out,” she snarled at Bernard. She couldn’t think. Not with him standing there, smirking at her, superior. Lying? Telling the truth? She couldn’t distinguish the two anymore. “Get out of my office right now, or I’m calling security.”

“You know that I’m right...”

“You’re wrong,” she said quietly, her heart wrenching, knees buckling slightly, and she fell against the desk. “You’re wrong!”

His voice was a whisper now. “Am I?”

She shouted, "SECURITY!" but Bernard Terby had already left by the time she turned back to face him; she was left standing in the middle of her cubicle, shaking with a combination of anger, fear, and self-disgust. How could she have been so stupid? She knew what Bernard was. She knew that he'd made up ridiculous things – anything – to try and break up her and Tom. She should have known that he would only come to see her in an effort to stir up trouble.

A man with a riot-shield came a moment later, a severe expression on his face – looking very protective, but over-doing it slightly, Ginny had to admit.

"Sorry, false alarm," she mumbled to him, feeling embarrassed at the scene that she was now causing – several people were peering at her down the corridor, curious as to where the attractive boy had gone, and why he had left her trembling. "They've already left."

The security guard seemed to be disappointed as he slouched away downstairs again. There was probably a shortage of problems in the Daily Prophet's dull life that would require armed back-up, and he probably had little to do. Ginny would have felt sorry for him, but was preoccupied with the chaos in which her thoughts rushed around.

Suppose Bernard wasn't lying? Suppose Tom wasn't telling her the truth? Or worse, she realised, dread sinking through her, suppose that Tom had killed Scott – and this time, it hadn't been an accident?

xxx

A/N: RAWR. Bernard's back. :D

NEXT TIME:

Once dressed in a knee-length blue dress that she wouldn't have been caught in were she in her own era, she pushed through the bedroom door to the rest of the apartment, and her hazel eyes fell upon Tom standing still in the middle of the living, holding the Daily Prophet tightly and staring down at the front page.

“What’s wrong?” she asked worriedly, recognising his slightly-pained face as she moved towards him.

Xxx

Chapter Eighteen: Losing Light

He sighed, sticking his hands into the pockets of what looked to be an expensive jacket. “Shame about Reeve...” he said softly. “Shame about Riddle, too.” It became truly apparent now that the younger Slytherin’s consideration and kindness was a façade, and one that he could no longer keep up. He chuckled, shaking his head as though in disbelief. “What, you mean you haven’t worked out who killed your precious Reeve? I thought you liked being the detective, the good guy.”

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xxx

Her tired eyes opened, blinking blearily, and she stuffed her face into her pillow for a moment, too groggy to even consider getting out of bed. It was just work. She didn’t really have to go, did she?

Mmgffrrg. She groaned. I should probably get up.

Reluctantly, Ginny rolled away from the warm tangle of blankets where she could happily hide for a long time, and stumbled towards the wardrobe to choose some clothes for the day. She didn’t need to look back at the other side of the double bed to know that Tom was already up – he always woke up at least half an hour before she did. Saying that he enjoyed sleeping in was like saying that pacifists enjoyed poking dead people with sticks.

Once dressed in a knee-length blue dress that she wouldn't have been caught dead in were she in her own era, she pushed through the bedroom door to the rest of the apartment, and her hazel eyes fell upon Tom standing still in the middle of the living, holding the Daily Prophet tightly and staring down at the front page.

"What's wrong?" she asked worriedly, recognising his slightly-pained face as she moved towards him.

Tom's dark troubled eyes flashed up to her, not seeming startled at all that she had just silently appeared while he was musing the contents of the newspaper. He didn't speak; he just lowered his gaze and held the paper out to her.

Wondering what on earth was happening, Ginny took the Prophet from him and turned it around so that the headline of the front page was the right way up for her to read.

BODY OF MISSING MAN FOUND

At quarter past three yesterday afternoon, the body of missing eighteen-year-old man Scott Reeve, from Sussex, was found in an abandoned building in London. There were no traces found of his murderer save for a knife, and Aurors are currently...

Slowly, Ginny's eyes closed. She didn't want to read anymore. She had suspected that he would be dead ever since she first found out, but that didn't mean that didn't want to collapse with pain at the loss of yet another person she cared about. She could feel tears stinging her eyes, and she covered her face with one hand; letting the newspaper drop to the floor and hugging herself with her other arm. She didn't want to feel this weak.

Philippa. Scott.

It was funny. You'd think she would be used to this by now. You'd think that it wouldn't affect her more – once you've seen one murder, you've seen them all, surely. And yet it still hurt.

Tom stepped closer to her, taking the newspaper from her and tossing it onto the nearby coffee table; then putting his arms around her and hugging her tightly to him. "Are you okay?" he asked quietly, cradling her to him.

"Not again," she whispered brokenly, pushing her crushed face into the side of his neck. "Not again."

xxx

With a soft creak, the apartment door opened, and Ginny stepped through, closing it tiredly behind her.

She had gone to the Daily Prophet office, only to find everyone waiting for her with those hideous faces of sympathy that people always offered someone who had lost something – pretending that they cared, pretending that they knew how it felt. They had even told her to 'by all means, stay off work a day or two, until you feel better', when, in actuality, sitting at home all by herself with only her depressed contemplations to keep her company was the last thing that she wanted to do. Still, her protests had proved useless, and here she was.

Pulling off her coat, she hung it up inside the cupboard where, for all the success her journey to work had been, it might as well have stayed. She also stuffed her scarf in; as it was mid-February, and getting warmer, the scarf wasn't really necessary at all.

Turning back to the rest of the apartment, her eyes fell upon a small pile of papers covered in tables, graphs, and neat writing – papers that she recognised to be the documents that Tom had been working on for a while.

Oh dear, she thought, and tutting inwardly, somebody's in a forgetful mood today. She hoped that he hadn't needed them too urgently, or he might get in trouble.

There was an eerie silence in the apartment. Ginny wanted to put on some music, but she had given her Kids In Glass Cauldrons record to Grace for the wedding, and she didn't know where the rest of her

CDs were. She decided to live with the hush – it was strange, but not that bad. Dumping her bag and her wand on the cream sofa, she then noticed two letters sitting on the window-sill. With only a week or so left until the wedding, she and Tom had been receiving a lot of post from various invited people, saying whether or not they would be able to go. She moved towards the window to check the replies of whoever had written to her – Antonia Durrell, from school, about the wedding; also, a message from Grace.

“Blah-blah-blah, can come to the wedding, blah-blah, love Antonia. Coolsville.” Ginny shuffled that envelope behind Grace’s one, and tore open the second letter.

She stopped.

She knew now what was so strange about the silence... it was that it should have been silent... but it wasn’t.

She could hear breathing.

...She wasn’t alone.

In less than a second, her fingers locked, tight around the envelopes she held; the sides of Grace’s letter crumpling in her hands, not yet even read. Her shoulders tightened, and, very slowly, she turned around.

None other than Bernard Terby was leaning nonchalant against one wall, one foot tucked behind the other, watching her silently from under his sleek brown fringe whilst he idly twirled his wand around and around in his fingers.

Ginny stared at him. She had every reason to feel suspicious of someone who had just broken into her flat, and though she had once veered towards considering him her friend, it had been a while since she had been able to find any excuse to trust him.

“...Why are you in my house?” she asked, her tone wary. She realised several things – that the stature of her body had become a familiar battle stance that she had not fallen into in a long time; that

she didn't have her wand within five metres of her; that Bernard's green eyes were suddenly unattractive, so icy that she could find no beauty in them.

"I presumed that would have been obvious," he said softly. His eyes never left her face, and beneath the emerald ice, she thought that she could see something like hunger... like he'd been waiting a long time for this. Seeing that she was not going to answer, he said with a surprising level of calmness and patience in his voice, "I'm here to kill you."

The words that immediately came to Ginny's mind were a sarcastic 'very funny', but they died on her tongue before she had even opened her mouth, as she recognised the expression on his face. So many times had she seen Harry wear it when he spoke of Voldemort. So many times had Ron displayed it when Hermione was mentioned after her murder. And then she had seen it on the face of Voldemort himself every time that he had killed one of her family in front of her.

Bernard was deadly serious.

"Get out." Her natural instinct was to back away, and after three years without living in a War, she was so unused to challenging the flight part of fight or flight that she almost obeyed. Then she recalled that she needed her wand, and made herself move surreptitiously towards it. "Get out now."

It was as though he knew exactly what she was going to do next; he was merely standing there, watching her inch closer and closer to her wand. It struck her that he probably did know what she was thinking of – after all, he could see into her head.

Seemingly in answer to that thought, Bernard arched one eyebrow at her.

At that moment, she dived towards the sofa, throwing herself forwards with as much combined momentum and spontaneity as she could muster – hopefully, reaching her wand before he even realised what she was doing.

“Expelliarmus!”

She felt the rush of her wand disappearing, and then she fell to the ground, hitting the wooden floorboards hard. Her breath rushed out of her lungs, and for a few seconds, she merely lay there, breathing hard. Then she lifted her eyes, and found both the tip of her own wand and also the tip of Bernard’s pointing down at her.

“Do you think death is painful?” he asked, very quietly. His face was still set in a terrifyingly serene expression, his features smoothed over with a cold nonchalance, as though he frequently broke into people’s houses and attempted murder, and it was now something that he was tiring of. Then, for the first time, there was a flash of emotion in his calm eyes. “I hope so.”

Ginny sat up, backing away. After barely a few inches of movement, she was pressed against the wall, and she used it to pull herself to feet. Recollection flooded her that there were anti-Apparating wards on the apartment, and dread filled her heart. She ran sideways to the unlit fireplace, grasping at the Floo-powder pot on the mantelpiece, but her fingernails only grated the bottom of it, squeaking.

Empty.

Only one way out.

In a burst of aggression and speed, Ginny sprinted for the door, knocking the armchair sideways-

“Morsus!”

Red light flashed, and as pain lit up inside Ginny’s head, she stumbled, falling sideways and hitting the wall, gripping it to keep her standing. The world swayed inside her eyes, her brain throbbing with an ache that was taking a long time to fade.

“You’re...” She tried to speak, tried to snarl at him, but she couldn’t get the words out in anything but short gasps as one hand clutched her forehead. “You’re... insane...”

"You brought this upon yourself." Bernard's tone of voice was still calm; so much that it was almost patronising. It reminded Ginny of his bitter 'don't patronise me' from when he had visited her in her office, and was tempted to repeat the phrase. "You could have just left Riddle, you know."

Ginny's mouth fell open, her hand falling away from her head. Surely not. "You're doing this because you can't break me and Tom up?" she said incredulously. She tried to see in his face if he was maybe joking, if he was deliberately being stupid, but for all she could tell, he was serious. "This is ridiculous!" she exclaimed. "You decide to kill me just because you can't get to go with you? 'If I can't have her, no-one can'. Is that it? I'm sorry, Terby, but that is just-"

"Do you really think I would be so petty?" Bernard suddenly roared.

Ginny flinched against the wall, hazel eyes wide. She didn't understand. She wasn't sure that she wanted to understand.

There was no trace of stillness and peace in the younger Slytherin's face now. Every inch of his face was etched with rage, eyes burning with anger. He still held both of their wands, his fingers tightened into fists so clenched that they looked painful.

"Do you really think I would be so petty?" he repeated, his voice low and even with venom. "That I would work for months just to get a girl who clearly wasn't interested? That I would go to such extreme lengths just to get a happy couple apart?"

Extreme lengths?

As far as she knew, he hadn't done anyth-

She froze, pieces of puzzle sliding one by one into place in her head.

He's able to see into my head. He knows about Tom's problem. He knows that I know about Tom's problem. He would know that I would doubt him. He would know. He would...

"Shame about Reeve..." he said softly. "Shame about Riddle, too."

Ginny looked at him sharply. “Tom?” She didn’t recall there being anything wrong with her fiancé... every conversation that she and Bernard had shared flooded back to her – almost all revolving around how, supposedly, she and Tom weren’t right for each other. “What about Tom?”

It became truly apparent now that the younger Slytherin’s consideration and kindness was a façade, and one that he could no longer keep up. He chuckled, shaking his head as though in disbelief. “What, you mean you haven’t worked out who killed your precious Reeve? I thought you liked being the detective, the good guy.”

“No,” Ginny said, too loudly. She was having trouble controlling herself. “No. It wasn’t him.” She took deep breaths to steady herself, gripping the back of her chair behind her. “Tom didn’t kill Scott. It – it wasn’t him. I know that it wasn’t. He told me.”

Bernard tilted one sleek eyebrow at her. “Of course that’s what he tells you...”

“Get out,” she snarled at Bernard. She couldn’t think. Not with him standing there, smirking at her, superior. Lying? Telling the truth? She couldn’t distinguish the two anymore. “Get out of my office right now, or I’m calling security.”

“You know that I’m right...”

“You’re wrong,” she said quietly, her heart wrenching, knees buckling slightly, and she fell against the desk. “You’re wrong!”

His voice was a whisper now. “Am I?”

He would know.

Extreme lengths.

Bernard would also know that she would, within herself, reluctantly doubt him. He would know that with the right persuasion, Ginny could

be led to think that Scott's entirely coincidental disappearance would be Tom's fault.

Ginny dragged in air, her stomach caving slightly as she understood. "You – you framed him," she whispered. It wasn't a question.

Bernard didn't immediately answer her statement – not directly, anyway. "My mother remarried when I was ten. Did you know that?" he asked softly, tilting his head to one side. The strange, terrifying serenity had almost completely returned; only ruined by the flaming fury in his green eyes. "I then had a stepfather – by the name of Cadwygawn Vander."

Silently she stared forwards. Bernard and Vander...

"He also had a child from a previous marriage," said Bernard, after a moment's pause, judging her reaction. "Rosalind Vander. She was three years older than me, and she was the only person who understood how I felt about Vander and my mother. I understood how she felt about it, and how she felt about the death of her own mother, some years previously. When my 'parents'-' (he pronounced the word with scorn) "-were too busy with each other to care about us – about me – Rosie was old enough not to be affected by it – she took care of me. I took care of her when she needed. She was my best friend. She was the most important person in the world to me. I loved her. And she loved her father. And it was her father's murder that drove her to suicide!"

The last word was close to a shout. The level of sheer pain in it made Ginny cringe.

"So, yes, Peregrine," Bernard snarled, "yes, I did frame him!"

"He went to prison – it almost destroyed him!" Ginny said desperately, trying to defend Tom. Trying to find reasoning for Bernard not to kill her. "For the longest time, I was worried that he might have actually had the Dementor's Kiss and had his soul taken away – he was... he was shattered – he – isn't that enough?"

"I don't want justice," he spat back at her. "I want revenge. You forget that I read minds, Peregrine. I knew about Riddle's bipolar psychosis. I was fifteen years old and I knew who had killed the one person I cared about. I watched him live on as though nothing had happened; as though he was totally unaware how many lives' he'd ruined. I could have turned him in at any time, but I saw something better. The one person he cared about. The only person that he ever had or ever would care about."

Bernard took a step closer, eyes staring into hers. Ginny felt paralysed, her back pressed against the wall, unable to move.

"You." He took another step. "Yes, you. I was relying on you rejecting him when you found out what he was. I knew that if anyone could break him down, it was you. I was watching, waiting – and you welcomed him with open arms," he said, his tone rich with revulsion. "You helped him. Your resolve to get him out of Azkaban the next year was disgusting – I thought that he would finally be getting what he deserved. Rotting in a prison cell with a broken heart. And you rescued him. You didn't just rescue him, you agreed to marry him. When you had broken up, I had finally been satisfied. I knew that being away from you was the worst kind of torture he could imagine, and I did everything I could to keep you apart, but to no avail. I had hoped that by becoming close to me, you might value my 'friendship' over being with him, but you were so determined to be together it was infuriating. I couldn't see how you could possibly bear to be in love with a murderer... and then I realised. He had never harmed anyone that you personally cared for."

Bernard shrugged, for all appearances uncaring. All that betrayed him were the malevolent, gleeful eyes, which danced across her face almost greedily before he continued.

"I saw how close you were to Reeve and-"

Yet another piece of puzzle fell into place. Ginny gasped, pain tearing through her stomach. "Scott!" she cried.

"Scott Reeve," Bernard repeated, rolling the name in his mouth as though savouring it. "It was surprisingly easy to frame Riddle, you

know,” he sneered. He ticked off his fingers. “Kidnap Reeve, kill him in the same savage way that Riddle always does, Obliviate part of his memory so that he wasn’t able to remember what he had been doing at the time... Naturally, he assumed that he had been possessed.” He chuckled without humour. “It was all going so well. He was uncertain if he had done it, and was trying to hide things from you. You found out anyway – as I knew you would, the little detective that you try so hard to be...”

He reached out and lightly traced Ginny’s jaw with the back of his cold hand; she snapped her face away from him, her lip curling in repugnance.

“I let the evidence build up... and then I revealed Reeve,” said Bernard. “I hadn’t even realised about dear old Decrow – that really was the icing on the cake.”

“You’re sick,” Ginny gasped, still hugging herself tightly at the pain coursing through her at the mention of Scott and Philippa. “You’re insane!”

Bernard continued as though she hadn’t spoken. “The plan from there was for you to leave Riddle – leave him with a broken heart. He’d be crushed. And then, you would suddenly, unexpectedly, and brutally be murdered.” His voice slowly gained volume, face contorting with anger. “He would finally know how it feels to lose someone he loves! He would understand the agony of knowing that he had been unable to save them. ...It would kill him in the slowest, most painful way.”

“You don’t have to do this!” Ginny exclaimed, stalling him while she tried to think of a way to get out of this alive. “He’s already lost me – three times! He knows how it feels. You don’t have to try to teach him.” She could see in Bernard’s face that her efforts were so far not achieving anything. “Look, he doesn’t hurt people on purpose!”

“I don’t care!” Bernard roared. “Just because he doesn’t mean to do it doesn’t cancel out that he does it!”

Ginny could remember saying this, some weeks ago. It chilled her that she had been so ready to leave Tom at that time. She could have ruined everything, had she left. She could have killed both of them.

“Consider this a favour, Peregrine,” he said icily. “If I don’t kill you now, then there’s no doubt that either your freak baby or the murderer himself will.”

Cold fury flamed through Ginny, and she balled her hands into tight fists. “Calm down, Bernard,” she ground out, “just calm...” Then, not even bothering to finish her sentence, she reversed her statement by not calming down herself – she hurled herself that short distance and threw her right fist forwards and upwards with all the force she could put behind it.

Bernard yelped and stepped backwards – mostly out of surprise, not having read her split-decision choice before she did it. One hand flew to his nose, which was now flat to his face and spurting thick red blood. Triumph and adrenaline fuelling her attack, Ginny punched out again, ignoring her raw split knuckles, the crack of his jaw music to her ears-

He abruptly moved his hand sideways from his nose, and caught her arm before her clenched fist even reached his face the third time; twisted it backwards, sneering at her gasp. He shoved her violently backwards into the nearest large object – a glass-fronted cupboard. The doors exploded, shattered glass imploding on impact, but still Bernard held her there, pinning her to it by her arms, pressing down until tears of pain came to her eyes as her wrist crunched loudly, an involuntary scream tearing from her lips.

Despite the agony burning through her arms, Ginny put all of her weight on them, lifting one foot to kick at him as hard as she could. He was caught off-balance – she kicked again, harder, square in the chest. He staggered backwards a step, dropping her where she was restrained against the wall. Not expecting this, she also stumbled, falling partly against the wall, dragging in air as quickly as best she could in the space of time where they weren’t fighting, where she was free to catch her breath.

Bernard then abruptly grabbed her, spinning her sideways and throwing her down to the floor, laughing as she skidded across the blood-stained wooden floor-boards and then hit the wall, curling up into the foetus position.

“How does it feel?” he said quietly, walking over to her. Ginny didn’t answer. Her eyes were tightly closed shut, the side of her face pressed against the cold ground. When no reply came, he aimed a swift kick at her stomach. “How does it feel?”

Pain exploded behind her eyelids, and she curled up tighter, but that didn’t make the pain stop. She hadn’t felt this weak since the War. She just let tears leak from between her shut eyelashes and waited for it to stop...

And then it did stop. But she wasn’t dead. At least, she didn’t think so. But it hurt to think.

Things happened very quickly then – too quickly for Ginny to understand. Even had it been in slow-motion, she wouldn’t have been able to. Everything was blurry and confused.

The bang of a door, twisted words, crash, bang... confusing... light fading out... so confusing... voices... didn’t understand... bleary, pained eyes open...

Someone very tall standing close to the wall... Ginny blinked, each tiny movement painful... her vision cleared slightly... that someone pinning a smaller, brown-haired someone to the wall by their throat... she blinked again... confusing words...

“...then. Kill me. But... remember that ... watching, and she can’t help... wonder if all of the ... deaths at your hand... accidental as mine will...”

...The first someone, not the one who had just spoken, was breathing hard... turned their face to stare down at Ginny, on the floor... a familiar face... couldn’t... so difficult... face contorted with pain... a great struggle... dropped the smaller someone inelegantly to the floor...

“...Get out.”

Light fading out again... so tired... so painful... echoing, harsh footsteps... a quiet, concerned voice... words... close to her... careful arms picking her up, cradled against them... too tired... slipping into darkness.

xxx

A/N: MWAHAHA. And no-one saw that coming, didcha? Yeah, sorry it was kind of weird. And I am so sorry that it's this late. I really am. I've been so busy – I had to do a 2000 word English coursework essay on freakin' sympathy, of all things, and designs briefs for technology, and I had to do all these choir thingies and I went on a school trip and I got my laptop confiscated after all of that and mehhhh. Sorry. But I'm back, and hopefully it won't be too long a wait for the next chapter! Love you all, please review!

Xxx

Chapter Nineteen: Happy

“So, yes, Peregrine,” Bernard snarled, “yes, I did frame him!”

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xxx

At approximately seven-thirty, Ginny was roughly woken to being shaking by the shoulders, Grace Hartwin’s round face looming over her.

“What the hell?” Ginny muttered, blinking blearily. “How... what...?” She frowned. “How did you get in?” She glanced sideways at the other side of the bed. “Where’s...?”

“He’s already gone,” said Grace. “Alden had to go through stuff with him. It’s easier for you – all you have to do is walk down the aisle and say ‘I do’.” She peered at Ginny. “You are going to say ‘I do’, right?”

“Yeah, yeah...” the redhead kneaded her eye-sockets with her knuckles and allowed herself to be hauled out of the bed. Wedding. Right. She knew that. “...Where are we going?”

“To the moon.”

“But, Grace... I’m tired.”

“Stop complaining.”

Reluctantly, Ginny stumbled away from her apartment and Side-Along Apparated to Grace’s house, not fully awake enough to Apparate by herself. The last thing that either of them wanted was for her to be horribly Splinched on her wedding day.

Ginny was ushered into Grace’s bedroom, which had become a large dressing-room with mirrors on every wall, offering the bride-to-be three-sixty degrees of self-admiration, if she so desired... which, frankly, she didn’t. Still, she ‘ooh’ed and ‘ah’ed sleepily at it to keep Grace happy, who was obviously very pleased with herself. Ginny thought the mirrors were quite pointless, as Grace then proceeded to cover them all with curtains so that Ginny couldn’t see herself until she was finished having a ‘bridal make-over’, as Grace so cheerfully dubbed it.

“Shower. Now.”

Too tired to risk being bullied by Grace, Ginny obeyed. She knew that organising this meant a lot to her friend, and also knew that Grace was probably the only person who would dare to attack the bride.

Five minutes later saw Ginny sitting patiently on a stool while Grace shuffled around and around her, equipped with her wand, a lot of make-up, curlers, and a vast quantity of pins. She had no idea what was being done to her face and hair, and just settled for hoping that she wasn’t being painted with clown make-up. Then she was standing in her underwear whilst Grace attempted to more than permanently attach the tight white bodice of the wedding dress to her torso.

“Ow,” Ginny gasped, her hands flying to her abdomen.

“What?” Grace frowned. “There’s a Concealed Enlargement Charm on it... it shouldn’t be too tight.”

“No – it’s just...” Ginny struggled for words. She hadn’t mentioned being beaten by Bernard to anyone but Tom, and even to him –

especially to him – she hadn't mentioned being kicked in the stomach, let alone that it hurt even after she had been healed. She didn't want him worrying. She sighed. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"You're not having the baby early, are you?"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Yes, Grace. Five months early." She shook her head. "No, really - I'm fine."

Grace eyed her. "If you say so..." she said uncertainly. "But if you pass out at any point in the next four hours, I will actually kill you. Screw Romeo – I'll kill him as well in my wrath as I try to get to you to rip your face off for ruining it." She lifted a warning finger at Ginny.

"Freakin' A, calm down." Ginny was going to say more, but was cut off as she had a lot of fluffy white material eased over her head, and she recalled talk of frills with some dread.

Oh dear.

Shoes. A veil. A small flower. Various things were thrown at her to hold while Grace fixed infinitesimal imperfections, and then Ginny had to balance them before Grace could take them off her and apply them to her large redheaded dress-up doll herself.

"And... there we go." Grace combed a loose strand of Ginny's hair with her fingers, pushing it out of her face, and then, smiling, turned her to the mirrors; drawing the curtains away from the glass.

Ginny didn't look. She couldn't.

"Stop being modest," said Grace, smacking her with the back of her hand. "You look beautiful. Now, you've got about five or ten minutes to admire yourself while I get ready at lightning-speed." The brunette then hurried from the room, muttering something about curlers and lipstick.

Very slowly, almost as those she was afraid of what she would see, she looked into the mirror.

She stared. She didn't know if this confusion was what Tom felt every time he saw his reflection and recognised the face of his alter-ego... because the person in the mirror couldn't be her.

A woman looked back at her, not a clumsy and socially-inept nineteen-year-old. A pale, slender woman with, thanks to Grace's enchantments, absolutely no hint of an awkward pregnancy beneath the smooth, simple white dress that clung at first and then swept out to hide her feet. Shoulder-length red curls fell loosely around a pretty, perfect face; a hairband of tiny white flowers held in place the soft veil that fell to small of her back.

She... she was beautiful.

Ginny turned from side to side, smoothing her dress as she looked at all angles, still unable to believe that this could possibly be her.

"You ready?"

She jumped; she hadn't heard Grace return. The brunette was already completely set to go, dressed in a lightly shimmering knee-length silver bridesmaid dress, wavy hair for once tamed.

"Yeah, I'm good," said Ginny, turning her back on the terrifying reflection. "You look great."

"Cheers."

Grace led her carefully downstairs, where, thankfully, every room was empty of family members who would tell her how nice she looked. It wasn't that she didn't like compliments... she just felt awkward talking normally to people when she knew what she looked like. She didn't feel like herself anymore. Once out of the anti-Apparating wards, they vanished together to... wherever they were going.

It became apparent where they were going (something, which, ideally, she should have been clever enough to realise instantly, but wasn't) when they arrived, as Ginny found herself in a huge reception filled with white balloons and flowers. "Oh," she whispered as she was pulled towards a door, through which soft chatter became slightly

louder. They were met by a small room with arched doors, in which Heather Tristanebury stood waiting.

“Heather!” Ginny exclaimed, and gave the young girl a hug, cautious not to ruin all of Grace’s hard work on how she looked.

“There you are!” Heather squealed, clapping her hands. She wore a dress identical to Grace’s, bringing out the silver in her dark grey eyes. “Wow, you look wonderful. I couldn’t believe it when Grace owled me!”

Ginny smiled, and then changed her focus as a distraction came in the form of Alden, tuxedo-clad. “Everything’s ready,” he said, tossing a grin at Ginny.

“Did you get Tom ready?”

“He was perfectly capable of getting himself ready, you know.”

“Alden!” Grace cried. “You let him get ready by himself, didn’t you? Oh no!” She dragged her hands down her face, hopping up and down. “This is a disaster.”

“No, it’s not,” Alden consoled her.

“He’s supposed to look special, not just – not just like himself!” Grace wailed.

“He does look special! Everyone stared when he came in and everything.”

“Everyone stares at him anyway!”

With an exasperated sigh, Alden dragged her to the arched door on the other side of the room and let her peer through. For a moment, Ginny was left standing in a concerned silence. Disaster? That didn’t sound too good. Then Grace and Alden returned, looking relieved.

“Oh, thank you, Alden, you’re wonderful,” Grace beamed, kissing him gratefully on the cheek; seeming not to notice the rush of colour to his face. “We’ll see you afterwards-”

“Wait!” Ginny flung a hand out, narrowly missing hitting Heather in the face. “Alden – can – can you... can you give me away?” It was a last-minute and completely spontaneous decision, but though she had come to accept that her father would not walk her down the aisle, she didn’t want to walk to Tom alone. Also, in this large dress, the probability of her falling on her face was even higher than normal.

Alden blinked, confused. When she had called for him not to leave, this evidently was not what he had expected. “Er.” He scratched his head. “Okay.” He looked as though he was going to say more, but then flowing music began, through which the wedding march melody was audible.

Grace glanced between them and sighed. “Fine, then. Ginny, you walk on the left. Alden can keep you in time, so it’s probably better that he gives you away anyway.” She nudged Heather. “Here we go.” She threw Ginny a wink before skipping away down the aisle with the twelve-year-old Hufflepuff at her side.

Ginny turned to Alden. “If I fall over, I’m blaming you.”

“Of course.” Alden held her at arm’s length and observed her. “Are you okay?”

“Yah-huh,” she said, even though she was trembling. She ignored this. “Never been better.”

“Good. Because our cue is...” Alden tilted his head, listening intently to the music, “...now.” He took her arm, and then walked her through the door and into the brightly-lit room where everyone she loved in this time-period awaited her.

She flinched slightly – it was brighter in there than she had expected. It took her eyes a moment to focus, and then her hazel eyes flew further and further down the small chamber, landing on...

Without realising, she stopped walking as her eyes widened and took in Tom Riddle.

She loved him. And he loved her. And he was going to be her husband. And she didn't know if it was the lighting or just the fact that she was light-headed and couldn't see properly, but he was inhumanly beautiful.

"Ginny," Alden hissed, tugging on her elbow, and, with a small stumble, she continued walking, skipping a few steps to get back in time with the slow march.

"Oops," she mumbled, flashing him an apologetic look.

As they drew closer to the front, every pair of eyes watching them, there was an outcry of "pretty Piggie!", which brought a smile to her lips despite her concentration on staying in time and not tripping over the hem of her dress.

And then she was there.

Lifting her eyes to those of what had once been a colour of loathing, she turned so that she was side-on to their watching family and friends. She didn't know if she was doing it right, but she didn't care.

"We are gathered here today," began the minister in a voice which Ginny used to foretell immediately that he was going to be a very boring man, "to celebrate the love shared between Tom Riddle and Ginevra Peregrine, and to witness their union until death. If anyone here has any reason why they should not be together, please speak now or forever hold your peace."

Ginny flinched. Bernard, she said inside her head, if you dared to show up, be aware that I will tear you into very small pieces and eat those pieces if you say anything now, completely regardless of the people watching or the idea that I might spoil my dress and then-

"Do you, Tom Riddle, take Ginevra Peregrine to be your lawfully wedded wife, to share your life openly, standing with her in sickness

and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in hardship and in ease, to cherish and to love, as long as you both shall live?”

His dark eyes didn't leave her face for a second, and though she gave him a smile, his face was completely serious as he said softly, “I do.”

“Do you, Ginevra Peregrine, take Tom Riddle to be your lawfully wedded husband, to share your life openly, standing with him in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in hardship and in ease, to cherish and to love, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” said Ginny, her eyes clouding with tears. She never would have thought that she could be this happy with him, of all people.

“Very well,” droned the minister. “Best Man, may we have the rings?”

Then, to Ginny's immense surprise, none other than Eleanor Fionn leapt up, garbed in blue, and moved quickly towards them, beaming and holding a medium-sized box, open so that the contents could be seen – two small gold bands.

Tom took a ring and then lifted her hand in his, looking only at her fingers for a moment before looking back up into his face. When he spoke his vows, it was quietly, not wanting to have to declare his feelings at an unnecessary amplitude, but though quiet, was almost raw with emotion. “Ginevra... you're perfect – but... you're not. Your imperfections were what made you so infuriatingly beautiful to me. You were loud, you were obnoxious, you were never on time, you skipped homework, you acted like a lunatic, you weren't afraid to shout at me – and I was captured by every second of it. You were unlike anything I'd ever seen before, and quite abruptly everything that I said or did meant something. The thought that I meant something to you was... ridiculous. Yet, for some reason, I did. And here I am now, after everything.” He slipped the ring over her finger. “I take you, Ginevra Aioibheann Peregrine, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part.”

Ginny bit her lip, taking the ring. She didn't like him making his vows first – his were really pretty and romantic, and she didn't even have a proper vow aside from the general 'for better or for worse' stuff. She would seem weak and silly by comparison.

"I love you," she settled for whispering, "more than should be possible. I take you, Tom Riddle, to be my husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part."

For the first time since that stunned expression when he'd first seen, since he'd covered it up so well and then adopted this seriousness, a small smile cracked Tom's lips faintly.

The minister held his arms aloft. "On this day, I now pronounce you man and wife. Mr. Riddle, you may kiss the bride."

As those watching erupted into frantic cheers and applause, Tom's face split into an expression of extreme bliss, no longer even trying to maintain his façade of not caring. She caught only a glimpse of the overwhelming happiness in his eyes before he then took her face carefully in his hands and kissed her.

Time stopped – or, at least, went very slowly for a moment or two – and then only the monotone of the minister announcing, "May I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Riddle," reminded them where they were; they reluctantly withdrew from the other's lips and turned to look at those watching.

"Oi, Mrs. Riddle!" Grace yelled, beaming, as soon as they descended the few steps into the rows of seats.

Ginny grinned. "Yes?"

"It's so weird calling you that!" Grace exclaimed. "Ginny Riddle. Ginevra... Aiobheann... Riddle." She clapped her hands together. "It sounds cute!"

“Cheers,” Ginny said, smiling, and then she and Tom attempted to make their way out to the reception, battling through vast crowds of happy people congratulating them.

“Ohmigod!” Eleanor Fionn squealed, following them out of the hall. Ginny tried to say hello, but was rather rudely ignored, as all of Eleanor’s attention was on Tom – she was bouncing on her toes and pointing a finger at him. “I told you so! Didn’t I? Didn’t I?”

Tom gave her a silent look – one eyebrow slightly raised. “You told me so,” he humoured her. “Yes, yes, you can live off that joy for the rest of your life now.” Ginny gave her husband – her husband!! – a curious look, and he explained wearily, as though he’d quite expected this of Eleanor, “She believes that-”

“I don’t believe that this was my doing, because it’s true.” Eleanor gave him a triumphant look, before returning her concentration to Ginny. “You would never have made the first move, and I noticed that he went red and forgot what he was doing just about every time you came near him, and I pointed out to him that he blatantly fancied you, and I encouraged – well, demanded, really – that he ask you out, and I am, basically, the cause of this whole glorious marriage.”

“We’ll go with that for now,” Tom said dryly, smirking, and he pulled Ginny into his side, his arm fitting neatly around her waist. His hand rested lightly on her stomach, and Eleanor didn’t miss the subtle gesture. Her blue eyes widened times a hundred.

“Tom!” she gasped, her mouth falling open. “You did not!” She shook her head chidingly, hitting him gently on the arm. “You dirty, dirty little man.” Even she, it seemed, knew well enough not to say ‘pregnant’ out loud, guessing that not everyone present was aware.

“Hang on,” Alden appeared beside them. “Did you forget something?” He held out to her a bouquet of white roses, his eyebrows tilted teasingly at her.

“Oh.” She flushed red. “My bad.” She took the flowers from him, and then, with only a shouted, “oi – people!” to warn the guests, hurled them backwards over her head.

She paused a second, cringing instinctively, hoping that it hadn't killed someone or broken something, before spinning. She turned in time to see a surprised-looking Heather catch it – and then she saw Grace whisper, "You're only twelve. I'll take that from you" and steal it, grinning.

"Be nice, Grace!" Ginny called, but she was too ridiculously happy to even consider pursuing the matter further. She leaned back against Tom's shoulder, his chin resting lightly on the top of her head. She just watched what was happening. Watched Heather roll her grey eyes exasperatedly; watched as Grace's own eyes flickered to Alden across the room, still holding the bouquet; watched as she stuffed the flowers into a vase, dusting her hands clean of them, and skipped across to Luke. A slight frown curled her lips. It didn't seem fair that Ginny should be so at peace when Grace was so far from her own happy ending.

"Smile," a voice said softly in her ear, warm breath dancing across her throat. "Be happy."

"I am happy," she whispered back to Tom, twisting her head sideways to look up at him. She pushed thoughts of Grace and Alden from her mind, and a small smile floated to her lips; quiet lips which his cool thumb brushed lightly across before moving to curl under her chin and to kiss her.

Somewhere nearby, a few people cheered and clapped; some, who sounded suspiciously like Grace and Eleanor, yelled, "Snog her face off!"

Completely disregarding this rowdy comment, centimetres from her lips he murmured, "Dance with me, Mrs. Riddle?"

"I'd love to." Her smile increased in size at the new name.

Tom turned her around so that she was facing him, and, right where they were standing, took her hands to waltz in time with the beginning chords of a piano ballad. The other guests watched them spin and

step for a few seconds before one by one joining them on the dancefloor.

“Happy now?” she asked teasingly as they twirled together.

“I was already happy,” Tom replied, arching one eyebrow. “I was telling you to be happy.”

“True.” Ginny recalled something that Eleanor had said, and asked curiously, “Did you really forget what you were doing every time I came near you?”

“No.” Tom looked slightly embarrassed. “Not every time. Just the vast majority of the time.”

Ginny considered this. “I never noticed.”

“Well, you wouldn’t. Primarily, you are extremely unobservant,” he smirked as she nudged him playfully with her elbow, “and secondly, you only saw me when I was with you, and therefore acting differently to the usual – you never experienced what I was normally like.”

“Aw.” She tapped the tip of his nose with her finger. “Cute little flustered Tommy, then?”

“Basically.” He spun her out in a circle, her hand twisting loosely in his, and then turned her back towards him. “You were irritatingly distracting.”

“Were?” she teased.

“Still are,” he amended, smiling. “You’re beautiful, you know.”

She flushed pink. She wanted to say thanks, or mumble something about Grace having done all of the hard work, but nothing came to mind.

“You don’t always have to say something, Ginevra,” Tom said softly. “You can just accept without any protest that someone loves you with their all.”

Ginny did have to say something, though, but she left it at a whispered 'I love you'. She rested the side of her face gently against her husband's chest, careful not to stab herself on the pin holding in place the flower on his lapel. She could see people watching them with a range of expressions – some amazed, probably at the sight of the famed Tom Riddle being so cuddly; some with their faces soft with empathy and care... and Angelina, glowering with envy. She smiled. She didn't care. She was happy now.

xxx

A/N: Awwwww. YAY! They're married now! I didn't know if I did the wedding justice. I wanted it to be really romantic, but like really private-ish, like Tom and Ginny are in their own like fluff bubble and everyone else is just kind of like "whoa". I dunno. Tell me what you thought! Please review!

Chapter Twenty: Your Colours

“You don’t always have to say something, Ginevra,” Tom said softly. “You can just accept without any protest that someone loves you with their all.”

Ginny did have to say something, though, but she left it at whispering “I love you”. She rested the side of her face gently against her husband’s chest, careful not to stab herself on the pin holding in place the flower on his lapel. She could see people watching them with a range of expressions – some amazed, probably at the sight of the famed Tom Riddle being so cuddly; some with their faces soft with empathy and care... and Angelina, glowering with envy. She smiled. She didn’t care. She was happy now.

xxx

“Congratulations, though I’m sure you’ve heard that a hundred times already,” said a grinning Edward Storne, Head of the Daily Prophet. He seemed either completely unaware of (or ignoring) his resentful daughter behind him. “Still, I wish you every happiness.”

Ginny beamed at him. “Thank you-” she started, but then Elizabeth Menzies slipped in front of him to hug the bride. “Beth!”

“Sorry that I didn’t say hello before – a distraction came in the form of a beautiful guest,” Beth excused herself, throwing a sultry look back over her shoulder at a broad blonde man who looked vaguely familiar. “You look absolutely gorgeous, Peregrine, honestly, I’m jealous-as back here. Congrats and all that jazz – oh! And have a lovely honeymoon...” she winked, poking Ginny with her elbow suggestively. “Well, I’m off. Love you – I’m going to miss you for the two weeks you’re be in wherever-you’re-going.”

However, then the blonde man that Beth found so ‘beautiful’ came up to speak to Ginny – and she recognised him as none other than Jack Swithin. “Jack!” she exclaimed. “Whoa, different much?” She gave him a hug, if slightly tentative, as though she and him had been friendly, they had never been extremely close. “How are you?”

"The focus is on you today," he reminded her, concealed warmth under his gruffness. "Congratulations." He cast a glance at Tom, who was getting his own audience. "Have to admit, I never thought I'd see the day that Riddle tied the knot."

She tilted her head. "Well, that day is here, so you just got your theory shattered, Swithin."

She was next approached by a timid Louise, and Will Gallantree beside her; then Eleanor, who she had already spoken to numerous times; Grace's family; Alden and his family; Heather; Luke; Antonia Durrell and Mia Brown; Ramira Xau, and then some other people from work who she wasn't entirely familiar with.

As she was just saying goodbye to the man who worked in the cubicle next to hers at the Prophet, an arm curled around her waist and Tom's voice said in her ear, "It's nearly time to go. Has Har-Grace come to see you yet?"

"No," said Ginny, confused-

"Hold your horses, Romeo," said Grace, staggering up to the couple and lugging a large suitcase, which she held out to Ginny, but was taken by Tom. "Oi, that was for her."

"What is it?" Ginny was still nonplussed as to what was going on.

Grace rolled her eyes. "It's a portable house in a box," she said sarcastically. Then she hit her forehead with her palm in a no-duh gesture. "It's your honeymoon stuff, stupid."

"Ohh." Now the redhead wished that Grace had given the suitcase to her; she wanted to see what was inside and, from that, guess where they were going. She hadn't given much thought to it previously, but she realised now that it was a mystery. "Cheers."

"Yeah, yeah, thank me for the whole shindig when you get back." Grace grabbed Ginny and wrapped her in a bear-hug, before glancing at a stop-watch. "Now vamoos, or you're going to be late."

“Bye!” she shouted backwards as she and Tom moved towards the Apparation room of the reception. She noticed that her suitcase had already disappeared – presumably enchanted to fit in his pockets. “Where to, Doctor Who?” she asked, linking her arm through his.

He gave her an appraising look.

“Oh.” Red coloured her face. “Sorry. Irish thing.” She felt really stupid; she was slipping up a lot recently about the whole time-period thing.

Tom stopped with her inside the Apparation room. “You don’t mind, do you?” He held up a small blindfold.

“Er, no.”

“Good. Because you didn’t really have a choice.” He tied the strip of fabric around her head with careful fingers, pushing her hair out of her face and making sure that no strands of scarlet were caught in the knot. He briefly checked that she couldn’t see; then he took her hand in his, and they vanished.

“Hello,” said a crackly voice on an intercom, “and welcome to the International Apparation Point, Gatwick, London...” – and then it changed – “Bonjour, bienvenue à l’Apparatenne des Autres Pays, en Toulouse, France...”

“France!” she said triumphantly. “See, the blindfold is pretty useless; I can still work out where we’re going through my multi-lingual-ness.”

“Good luck with that,” Tom replied, and she could hear a smug smirk in his voice. She had a feeling that she was going to eat her words in a minute.

They Disapparated, reappeared – and Ginny listened attentively to the intercom.

“Guten tag und wie Wilkommest du zur die Zeigenzusätzlichland en Munich...”

Ginny frowned. "Er..." She realised now that she actually wasn't very good at languages. She could still feel Tom smirking at her; she was determined not to be beaten. "I think... um..."

It said Munich... where's Munich? She screwed up her face in concentration. Isn't that in Austria? No, no...

"Are we in Germany?" she guessed hesitantly.

"Correct." They Apparated again. "Have fun."

She listened, and then her shoulders slumped. Well, crap. In her ears purred a smooth, welcoming voice saying, "Hei ja mieluinen jotta kansainvälinen elimet näyttää kotona Rovaniemi..."

For all she knew, it could be Swedish, Turkish, Eskimo or Hindu. It was just one big garble of funny and unrecognisable words. If this was where their honeymoon was, then it was becoming clear to her that she would spend a lot of her time bewildered. She hoped that Tom spoke Hindu. Or Turkish. Or Eskimo.

"...Where are we, Tom?" she asked, her voice small with defeat. She held onto his arm tightly, frightened of losing him and getting lost in a crowd of foreign people who would just stare at her because she didn't speak the language.

"Telling you would take all of the fun out of this," Tom said, his voice quiet and teasing. "Don't worry. You'll find out soon enough."

And so she followed him blindly, at one point stumbling over a soft and vaguely human-shaped obstacle which muttered indignantly, "Ay, hupsu muukalainen ihmiset...", and at another point, falling onto what felt like a bench... at least, she hoped it was a bench. It wasn't much further after that, and then she stepped out into somewhere stingingly cold.

"What-" she began, but a cold finger rested over her lips keeping her quiet, and she was led onwards. She moved warily up a large step, her skin still hurting from the cold, and then it was much warmer. She

could faintly smell smoke, and could hear a familiar chug-chug noise. A train.

Without complaint, Ginny followed Tom to wherever they were sitting, and sat there. She didn't know what to do. Normally she would look around, but as she was blindfolded that would be quite pointless. She huffed a sigh. "Well done," she said wryly, "you've got me completely confused. I have no idea where I am or what I'm doing. I hope you're pleased with yourself."

"Very."

The sound of his voice revealed him to be much closer than she had realised; in response, she curled up on the seat and leaned against him. She had woken up early and was tired; she couldn't see; and her stomach still hurt. Grace had strengthened the Engorgement Charm on her wedding dress, making it secretly even larger, but it still seemed painfully tight. Annoyed with herself for indirectly bringing Bernard back into her thoughts, Ginny tried to go to sleep. It was stupid to spoil her honeymoon just because of a few bruises. And sleep came...

She woke up what seemed like only seconds later, but it can't have been, as her hazel eyes were bleary with deep sleep (even behind the blindfold) and she could feel that her red hair was heavily mussed.

"Are you awake?" Tom asked, shaking her shoulder again. "I can't tell with the blindfold."

"Yeah, yeah," she mumbled sleepily, stumbling as she stood even though he helped her up, holding her shoulders to keep her steady.

They dismounted the train and then they were back in the icy cold. The chill woke her fully, and she didn't feel tired in the slightest. Tom led her forwards, and she had a bad feeling that they were walking from hereon.

"Is it far-" she started after a minute or two of walking, but was interrupted by Tom reaching and unfastening the blindfold, letting it drop from her face.

“Welcome to Rovaniemi, Finland,” he said softly, watching her awed expression as she took in her surroundings.

At first her eyes struggled to adjust, and then she saw. Everything was so... There wasn't a word for it. The ground was encrusted with snow like a thick white blanket, sparkling, broken only by a few footprints. The sky was a soft gray, as though lightly shaded by pencil, and though it was mid-day the sun was low in the sky like sunset. The wind that swirled the loosest snowflakes was bitterly cold, biting her skin red, dancing her hair around her face and back against her shoulders. And... it was silent.

They were quite far now from wherever the train had, and it was as though they were completely alone in the world. Not a sound was made aside from their quiet breathing, and the rustle of wind over pine needles on nearby trees.

“Come on,” he said, lacing his fingers through hers, and gesturing with his head in a direction to which Ginny could see nothing to head towards, but she didn't say anything, and just followed after him, still speechless.

After a while of walking through the snow, Ginny shivering, Tom holding her in his arms to keep her warm, a small wooden cabin came into view. Her breath snagged. She stopped walking and she then found that as she stared in wonder at the pretty little building in front of them, she couldn't start walking again.

“Let me take care of that,” Tom offered, and stooped, easily sweeping her up in his arms, moving towards the cabin. He had to tilt both of them diagonal to get her through the doorway, and then he pushed the door shut behind them with his foot.

It was a lot warmer inside the cabin; small, but cosy, with a small fire already dancing in the fireplace. Shifting Ginny slightly in his arms so that he could retrieve their suitcases from his pockets, he set the luggage down in front of the small sofa.

“What do you think, then?”

"It's beautiful," Ginny breathed, her eyes floating across everything she saw one more time, before looking up into her new husband's face. "Thank you so much."

The corners of Tom's lips curled into a small smile. "You know," he said, so quietly that he was only audible because of the complete silence, "I think we're alone now."

"At last," she whispered, also smiling.

He lowered his face to hers, kissing her as he carried her across to the bed; he laid her carefully on her back, leaning over her, one hand either side of her head. For a moment he just looked down into her eyes, completely motionless, and then he pressed his lips softly to hers.

Less than a second passed before Ginny lifted her arms to twine around his neck, pulling his face to hers, and he sank down until he was pressed lightly against her. His hands moved to tangle in her still-curly hair, his thumbs stroking her cold cheekbones; gently biting her lower lip, kissing her teeth. Her fingers curled in the short dark hair at the nape of his neck as his lips traced her jaw, his warm breath fanning across her skin in the pauses between when he was kissing her throat, beneath her ear, her shoulder...

Her blood rushed as his kisses trailed lower, even though she knew that due to her already being pregnant, they couldn't go as far as they wanted to. In this moment, she didn't care.

His smart black tuxedo jacket slipped from his shoulders, his bow-tie discarded somewhere nearby. She sat up, a shiver playing down her spine as Tom's fingers worked the zip down, lightly kissing the bare skin revealed. The last inch of zip was opened, and he bit there, the wedding dress slipping away from her body.

"I love you," he said, his voice just a whisper across her skin.

xxx

The next morning, Ginny discovered that it wasn't their own little cabin – it was part of a large lodge, cabins distributed evenly across the land to give each building their own sense of privacy. “Even so,” Tom told her as she struggled with the buttons of a warm winter coat, “I took you around the back so that you wouldn't see the other houses.”

“Aw, thank you,” Ginny said, kissing his nose. She recalled something, and then asked, “Er... Tom? Can you actually speak Eskimo?”

He arched one eyebrow at her. “It's called Finnish, Ginevra.”

“It's more fun to call it Eskimo.” Ginny finished fixing her coat up, and buried her hands deep in its pockets. She and Tom then progressed out into the cold winter wonderland outside. “Fine, then. Can you speak Finnish?”

“Yes, I can,” admitted Tom, “though not very well, and my accent probably massacres the language. Phi- Alden insisted I take a crash-course.”

“Oh, okay.” Ginny nodded, satisfied. “I was getting worried there – if you didn't, we'd be kind of stuck.” She bumped him with her hip, even though she was really too short for it. “Go on, then. Speak some Eskimo.”

He looked evenly at her.

“Finnish, even.”

“What do you want to know?” he asked, amusement flaring in his eyes.

She considered this. “Teach me how to say hello!”

This he told her, along with other phrases, though hello was the only one she could remember. When they went into the main reception of the lodge, she chirped her greeting, only to have Tom translate that the receptionist thought her accent was wonderful.

xxx

“Don’t let me die,” Ginny pleaded, clinging desperately to Tom’s arm. “And if I do anyway, know that I love you. And that I’m annoyed that you let me die.”

“Stop being so melodramatic,” Tom told her, raising his eyebrows. “You’re going to be fine. It’s not that hard.”

She huffed. “Sure.” She fixed an if-I-get-hurt-I’m-blaming-you scowl on him, and then reluctantly let go. As soon as she did, the skis beneath her set off, and with a loud squeal and flailing ski-sticks, she found herself travelling downhill. “Help!”

The world was speeding past her much, much faster than she would have preferred, and though she wanted to be brave and not get scared by the thought of falling and rolling down the slope to her death, she shrieked noisily, cringing in anticipation...

And then, slowly, the slope smoothed out to flat ground, and she floated to a halt over the snow.

She opened her eyes, scarcely believing that she had survived “I did it,” she gasped. She shuffled her skis to turn back around and face Tom. “I did it! I’m alive!”

His expression was not visible to her from that distance, but she guessed that he would probably be smiling for her. Then he set off. She didn’t know if it was because he was heavier than she was, or, without long hair and a huge coat, more streamlined, but he was certainly going very quickly – and then-

“Tom!” she exclaimed in horror, watching the crash and the collapse and the rolling down the hill. “Ohmigod!”

Finally he stopped, and Ginny shuffled towards him, but she was on skis, and he was still slightly up the slope, and as much as she moved upwards, she slid back down. It was infuriating, and what was even more annoying was the hilarity with which some nearby Finnish skiers were laughing at them. In the end, she reached down and

pulled off her skis with some difficulty, and then hurried up the hillside to him.

“Are you alright?” she asked, eyes wide with mingled disbelief and concern.

Tom untangled himself from his skis and his limbs, flopping backwards to lie down in the snow. “Ow,” he complained.

Seeing that he was okay, Ginny sighed with relief, and then began to giggle. “It’s not that hard’,” she mimicked him, grinning. “Don’t worry, it’s easy’. You loser.”

“Excuse me?” Tom said, and grabbed her, pulling her down into the snow beside him. She shrieked as she fell, and then snow exploded beneath her, spraying her hair and skin. Once she was done, he flicked snowflakes at her, but then amended by kissing them from her face and hugging her to him.

“You’re so silly,” Ginny laughed. “You were so patronising, making me think that I was such an idiot for thinking I wouldn’t be able to ski – and then you, Mr. High-and-Mighty! You’re so full of yourself.”

“Well, I had intended to show off and impress you,” he confessed sheepishly, “but I so far I do not think it worked very well.”

“Neither do I,” she teased. “Do you want to try again?”

xxx

On the Friday of the first week of their honeymoon, the wedding couple did not sleep in their little log cabin, to which Ginny had become quite accustomed. She didn’t know where they were going, but it was past four o’clock (which she had learnt to mean that it would already be dark), and Tom was leading her somewhere, blindfolded again.

“Where are we going?” Ginny asked.

“Well, I could tell you the name, but you wouldn’t understand,” Tom said. “We’re going to Pyhäluosto. Does that help?”

“...No.” She pouted. She didn’t like not understanding things, and while she guessed that she would like wherever they were going when they got there, she wasn’t particularly happy at the moment. “Are we there yet?”

“Don’t be so impatient.”

“...Are we there yet?”

“Ginevra.”

“Well, are we?”

“No.”

“...Are we there yet?”

“Ginevra, for God’s sake. No, we’re not there yet.”

“... Are we now?”

“No.”

“Now?” She paused. “How about now?”

She heard a sigh in front of her. “Yes.” Tom’s footsteps came towards her, and then she felt his hands at her face, untying the blindfold. “You can be so annoying sometimes.”

“I know. I was doing it on purpose. Sorry. I was bored.” The blindfold fell from her eyes, and she looked up at Tom in front of her. “Sorry.” She stood on tiptoe to kiss him. When she pulled away, she found that he was looking down at her with a bemused expression. “What?” she asked.

“Are you going to look at where we’re staying, or not?”

Oh yeah.

Ginny turned. At first, she could see nothing. And then she picked out...

"Ohmigod!" she shrieked, clapping her hands together. Her face lit up, beaming. "We are going to be Eskimos!" She spun back to face Tom, throwing her arms around his neck, her feet lifting off the ground. "Thank you!"

The igloo looked about large enough for two people, and when Ginny went inside, she found it to be surprisingly warm. She couldn't keep the grin off her face – it was just so cool! She was going to sleep in an igloo!

"I'm going to guess that you like it, then?" Tom suggested, joining her. He sat cross-legged beside her, and she leaned back to lie across his lap.

"I love it."

"It's going to be cold, though," he warned her. "It's warmer than it is outside, but it's still an igloo."

"Eh, doesn't matter," Ginny said, flapping a hand dismissively. "I can just steal your body warmth."

"And what, pray tell, if I refuse to let you have my body warmth?" Tom asked, a teasing note subtle in his low voice.

"Then I would die, and you would feel bad."

Tom raised his eyebrows sceptically. "Of course," he said, tilting his head mockingly. "If you died, I would 'feel bad'." He shook his head. "Somehow, I don't think that the choice of words is quite appropriate."

"Maybe not," Ginny murmured, considering how she would feel if anything were to happen to Tom.

She decided not to think about such unnecessarily depressing things, and tipped her face up to kiss him. He bent down to reach her, as by lying in his lap she was even lower than usual, one hand resting lightly on her stomach – and she was alarmed by how much it hurt. Her lips had only just touched his when she sucked in a short gasp, pain flaring in her abdomen.

“Are you okay?” Tom asked, puzzled and anxious. “What’s wrong?”

For one insane second, she considered telling him that her stomach hurt – but no, that was silly. It would only make him excessively worried, and that would spoil everything. She would be fine. “...Nothing,” she lied. “Just... cold. That’s all.”

“I did tell you,” he reminded her, seeming not to think anything else of her swiftly-concealed pain. Then he once more buried her lips gently under his.

xxx

At around seven o’clock, the blackened night sky burst into flame.

“Look!” Ginny exclaimed, leaping up from where she was sitting on the sofa. She stood, pointing, wide-eyed, at the window of the cabin. She wanted to say something else, something maybe like ‘wow’ or ‘oh my God’, but she was truly speechless.

Tom came from the cupboard, where he was putting away his coat after they had both been out (attempting to make ice sculptures with some local people), and came to stand beside her, looking out of the window. Ginny heard his breath rush out. “Merlin,” he said softly.

The Northern Lights danced brightly across the darkened sky, twisting pink and purple, then shifting to blue, then to pale green, colouring their faces oddly like a painted, ever-moving sun.

Ginny looked up into Tom’s face, smiling to see that it was tinted blue by the light of the sky. “You’re blue,” she told him, even though by that time it had changed to purple.

“You’re green,” he replied, also smiling.

The smile faded from Ginny’s face. She wasn’t sure if her green complexion held the Northern Lights entirely to blame; her stomach pains had been getting progressively worse, and they were now occasionally leaving her dizzy and feeling sick.

“What’s wrong?” Tom asked, seeing her expression fall. He took her face in his hands, his dark eyes concerned.

“I’m fine,” she lied once more. “I was just hoping I could be yellow, that’s all.” She lowered her eyes bashfully, praying that her face could also be translated as childishly disappointed, and that Tom would ask no further.

Tom let a small laugh, lightly kissing her forehead. “You can be any colour you want.”

He kissed her again, this time on the lips, this time not quite so lightly, one of his hands moving from her face to her hair; the other then slipped down to her waist, pulling her closer. She responded, wrapping one arm around his neck, her other hand to the small of his back - but that hand then slid around his stomach, his shirt riding up, her fingers playing lightly on his bare skin. His breathing hitched, his back arching at her touch.

His arms tightened around her waist, crushing her stomach against his – and pain spiralled through her a hundred lit fuses, causing her to gasp out. She waited for the hurting to go away, but it didn’t; it only become stronger.

“You know what I think this needs?’ she said abruptly, breaking away with swollen lips. “Champagne.” She didn’t really think so, but she wanted a chance to cool down and try to ease the ache in her stomach – maybe she could even pretend that there wasn’t any in the tiny kitchen of the cabin, and could make an excuse to go out in the snow, to cool her fevered skin.

Tom blinked at her, looking dazed and confused for a second. "Alright," he eventually said, and let go of her. A small smile lit up his lips as he jokingly said, "Your wish is my command."

No – Ginny had wanted to get it. She had wanted to slip outside... it was too hot in here, far too hot. Her blood was rushing, and her stomach was caving with pain, and... she couldn't see...

She heard Tom's footsteps fade away, gratingly loud in her ears – she could hear everything – her breathing, short, heavy gasps of pain... she realised with some alarm that she was swaying, and that if she didn't want to fall over then she'd better sit down – but she couldn't find the sofa- everything was blurry and distorted, and the floor was very far away, and though she lifted one foot to walk, she couldn't find where to put it back down, and she slipped –

And crashed down onto her stomach.

"Ginevra-?"

But even his voice was drowned out by her screams.

"GINEVRA!" Echoing, echoing – "Ginevra-" the smash and scatter of a falling champagne bottle – "oh my God" - and then she couldn't even hear him anymore, she couldn't see, she could barely breathe, she was on fire, there was just this burning agony, tearing her, killing her-

Tears streaming down her face, screams ripping through the apartment even as she fell from consciousness.

xxx

A/N: Oh, come on, you didn't think I'd let them get away with their happy ending so easily, did you? –manic giggle- Fun, fun, fun. Even though I think most of you saw this coming. Thanks to reviewers, please review!

Chapter Twenty-One: Decide

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“GINEVRA!” Echoing, echoing – “Ginevra-” and then she couldn’t even hear him anymore, she couldn’t see, she could barely breathe, she was on fire, there was just this burning agony, tearing her, killing her- Tears streaming down her face, screams ripping through the apartment even as she fell from consciousness.

xxx

“You what I think this needs?” Ginevra said, pulling away so unexpectedly that Tom nearly fell forwards on top of her. She didn’t seem to notice, and continued thoughtfully, “Champagne.”

He stared at her, bewildered and willing himself to say something. He was still breathing heavily, and while part of him wanted to be a gentleman and do whatever she asked, there was a much larger part of him that wanted her so much it hurt – a part that was disinclined to leave her in favour of champagne. “Alright,” he finally said, forcing down his hormonal side. A smile flickered to his lips. “Your wish is my command.”

Reluctantly, his arms fell away from her, and he gave her just a smile before he turning to the kitchen to find some champagne. It was a tiny kitchen, and, in theory, it shouldn’t have been hard to find anything – and yet it was. Eventually, however, he located a bottle, and straightened up, dusting off his hands from crouching on the floor.

At that moment, a loud thump came from the other room.

Tom frowned. “Ginevra?”

And then the piercing screams began.

“Ginevra?” he called, hurrying back through the other room, and what he saw ran ice through his veins. She was on the floor, curled up in a

tight ball, clutching at her stomach – a stomach that seemed to have completely caved in. “GINEVRA!”

He didn’t even notice the champagne bottle slipping through his fingers; he barely felt the broken glass and alcohol spraying across his feet.

“Oh my God.” He raced across to her, almost slipping as he dropped to his knees beside her. “Ginevra – GINEVRA-”

She didn’t even seem to be awake. She was just lying there, thrashing on the floor, screaming, tears streaking her unnaturally pale face, her skin burning hot to the touch, perspiration beading her brow – and that sick, perverse stomach, all wrong... not understanding what was wrong, Tom ripped aside the material of her shirt, and felt sick to his stomach when he saw purple blotching outwards across her abdomen as blood flowed beneath the surface of her skin without breaking through.

This is my fault – oh my God – oh God, it’s killing her – no –

Panic took over for a second, and for a moment he was frozen, just staring at her in horror. Then he realised that he needed to do something, and sprinted from the cabin, shoving through the front door. The cold hit him like a sledgehammer, and he hadn’t brought a jumper, let alone a wintry coat, but he continued.

The receptionist looked alarmed to see him - a snow-covered and panicked foreigner bursting through the door exclaiming terrible Finnish wasn’t very common.

“Er – kaivata – hospital,” he muttered, screwing up his forehead in concentration. “Hospital!” he snapped at the receptionist. “Shit, how do you say hospital? Tohtoroida... Kaivata tohtoroida?” he tried.

The only response he received was her blinking at him.

“For Christ’s sake, I need a freaking hospital!” he shouted. “My wife is dying – do you understand that much? Dying! Te käsittää? Hospital! Place – where – hurt – people – go! Väki loukata!” He raked a hand

roughly backwards through his hair. “God, I don’t have time for this – do you have someone who speaks English? Englannin? French? Anything?”

Again, the receptionist just looked blankly at him.

“Shit,” he groaned, turning and racing out of the main building again, back towards the cabin where Ginevra could be already – already –

DON’T THINK ABOUT THAT.

His throat choked up, and he found that he couldn’t breathe anymore.

She won’t be. She’ll be fine. She’ll be alright.

Ginevra was lying curled up on her side – she wasn’t screaming or shaking anymore. She was just completely motionless, limp and unmoving. Trying not to imagine that she might never move again, Tom gathered her clumsily into his arms, her head lolling listlessly against his chest; then he left the cabin, abandoning all of their luggage, and moved away from the other cabins as quickly as he could.

‘Don’t Apparate directly from where you’re staying’, he said, remember, Tom reminded himself, ‘it’s a Muggle community, you’ll upset the balance of Muggles and Wizards in Finland, just get the train to the Apparation Point-’

Screw that.

Tom closed his eyes and tried to calm himself down enough to Apparate (somehow, he didn’t think that Splinching Ginevra would help her in the slightest) – crack. They disappeared.

The two reappeared in the Rovaniemi Apparation Point, some ninety minutes away from the Luosto area where they had been staying. Tom was glad he hadn’t decided to get the train – she might not have made it that long-

STOP IT.

An empty, numb ache throbbed deep inside him in anticipation of her not making it. He was going to lose her. Again. He didn't know if he'd be able to handle it this time.

Not again – no –

Panic flooded through him when he saw that Ginevra's lifeless figure was shivering violently, but it eased when he realised that nothing was wrong with her – it was him who was uncontrollably shaking.

Stop that. You might be hurting her.

The thought that he might be causing her more pain made his throat constrict painfully, and instead he focused on getting through the doors to the Finnish Apparation Point, where hopefully there would be someone who spoke English – or, at least, someone who understood his crap attempts at Finnish – and knew where there was a hospital. He quickly located the Enquiries desk (though he hardly had a normal enquiry) and made his way towards it, ignoring the fact that a lot of people were staring at him, as he was covered in snow, and cradling his wife in his arms.

"We olen ei Suomi," he said desperately, pushing to the front of the queue and disregarding the irritated outcries of the people behind him. "English – do you speak English? My wife – autta – please – I need - kaivata tohtoroida – do you understand?"

"Mine English no good – one moment." The man at the desk hurried through a small door, and returned much more than a moment later, with a blonde woman.

"Can I help you?" she asked with a soft accent.

No, never mind, my wife is dying in my arms, I don't need any help at all – WHAT DO YOU THINK I NEED HELP WITH?!

"My wife – she – I don't know-" Tom tried to make his sentences come out intelligible, but it was proving difficult. "Something's wrong –

she won't wake up, and – and – she's barely breathing – and bleeding internally – I don't – please – hospital-"

"Yes, of course." The woman's expression became grave, and she moved around the end of the desk to stand beside Tom, taking his arm and leading him outside, where she then Apparated with him.

Once they reappeared in the waiting room of a small hospital, the woman called out something in Finnish too harsh and fluent for Tom to possibly try and understand; what seemed less than a second later, three Healers came from a pair of double doors, bringing with them a clean white stretcher.

"No-" It pulled from his lips even though he knew that it was selfish and stupid to say it when they were going to try to save her, but Tom subconsciously didn't believe that she was going to survive, and at least now, in his arms, he could feel her blood fleeting faintly through her veins, and hear her quiet, strained breathing – he could feel how alive she was now –

And the next time that he saw her, she might not be.

Yet, as he realised that this was probably going to be the last time he ever saw her, Tom could only stare uselessly after her as the Healers wheeled her away.

He wasn't aware of how much time passed while he simply stood there, staring at where she had been, but a nurse was suddenly close to his side and saying gently, in Finnish simple enough for him to comprehend, "Would you like to sit down?"

Without even looking at her, he said, "No"; and then sat down anyway, stumbling sideways to a bench and crumpling heavily upon it, burying his face in his hands.

You killed her. You lost her so many times, and now you finally had her... and you fucking killed her.

He groaned, digging his fingernails deep into his skull, trying to distract himself from the painful thoughts ricocheting through his brain.

Despite this, there was nothing else to think about – he couldn't just sit in this stupid hospital wondering about work or their luggage when Ginevra was being treated by total strangers, maybe dying, maybe... maybe... already...

His hands were shaking again, and this time he couldn't stop them. His breath was rough, made heavy by the struggle of getting past his windpipe, crushed with pain. Tom closed his eyes, trying to imagine that Ginevra was waking, that she was apologising to the doctors for causing such a fuss, because, honestly, she was fine, she wasn't bleeding internally, it was just a few simple bruises springing up quickly, the screaming had been another of those traumatised memory lapses – and yes, he knew that she hadn't had one of those nightmares in three years, never mind that, she'd had one now, and she's simply bumped her head – yes. She'd bumped her head and been knocked out. And there, there, was a simple explanation for why Ginevra was perfectly fine and it was all just a big misunderstanding.

Ginevra was not dead-

Then he dragged in air, agony coursing through him, because he knew that he had only been kidding with himself about Ginevra being alright, and even just thinking the word 'dead' made it all so suddenly, painfully real.

"Excuse me?" asked another nurse – this one speaking thickly-accented English. "Doctor Lemminkäinen will see you now."

Tom dropped his hands from his face and looked up at her, not understanding. "No, I'm not here to see a doctor – my wife – I'm waiting for..." then his words trailed off. "Oh God, she's died already, hasn't she?"

The nurse looked as though she was going to burst into tears, clearly not speaking a word of English past what she had been taught in training. "Doctor Lemminkäinen will see you now," she repeated.

Wordlessly, he stood, following. His face was completely blank – it could be nothing but empty of emotions if he couldn't find any within himself.

They moved through only a few corridors before reaching the door marked 'Lemminkäinen'. It had a smiley face on it. Maybe Lemminkäinen was always the one who told people that their wives or family members hadn't survived. Maybe the stupid smiley face was an effort to make the whole ordeal happier. However, inside, Tom found a very serious man with no trace of a smile on his face.

"You are the man who brought in the red-haired woman, correct?" he asked, taking a quill from a nearby ink-pot.

"Yes." His voice was quiet and toneless.

"Your names?"

"Tom and Ginevra Riddle."

"She is your wife, then? Or family?"

"Wife."

"Where do you live?"

"21-5D, Redrick Apartments. Market Crescent, South London. England," he recited tiredly, staring forwards without seeing anything in front of him.

"England?" Lemminkäinen asked curiously, peering at him over the tops of his spectacles.

"Honeymoon." One word was enough.

"Ah. I see." The doctor wrote something else down, and then set his quill down on the tabletop. He folded the parchment he had written upon and then pushed it into a small chute in the wall behind his head, where it then disappeared. Once it was gone, he returned his attention to Tom. "Now, I have some questions for you."

Tom didn't understand what was happening. "Is Ginevra-"

"Your wife is fine," said Lemminkäinen dismissively-

"Well, she's blatantly not, or I don't think she would be in hospital with internal bleeding," he snapped, not able to control himself and be civil.

"Please, Mr. Riddle, calm down. Sit."

He hadn't realised that he'd stood up. He sank silently back into the hard-backed chair in front of Lemminkäinen's desk, trying to no avail to stop his hands from shaking.

"I have a few questions of a very grave nature, so it would be best for you to maintain composure," the doctor said calmly. "Your wife is five months pregnant, is that right?"

"Four and half."

"Very well. Has she had any other previous pregnancies?"

"No." Not that I know of.

"Has she been bothered at all by this pregnancy before this point?"

"She passed out once, but the doctors informed us that it was only her system trying to adjust to the pregnancy."

"I see. And she is due to have twins?"

Tom's jaw tightened. "Yes," he ground out.

"Now... Mr. Riddle... can I just inquire as to... whether – well." Lemminkäinen took a deep breath. "Mr. Riddle, have you ever inflicted intentional or accidental harm on your wife during her pregnancy?"

His eyes flashed up to the doctor in horrified disbelief. "What?" he said sharply, not able to believe his ears. "Are you insane?"

"Answer the question, Mr. Riddle."

“No,” he exclaimed. “This is ridiculous – I would never-”

“Regardless of what you say – whether you have or haven’t harmed her – someone has, and it’s this that has brought on this attack,” Lemminkäinen told him.

Tom’s eyes narrowed with understanding. “Terby.”

“Excuse me?”

However, Tom wasn’t paying attention to Lemminkäinen anymore. He had realised something.

Twins – one moral, one immoral. The immoral one was injured. It fed parasitically off the other. Two souls, one body. ...My mother. ...Ginevra.

His face drained of all colour.

My mother died.

“Mr. Riddle?” Lemminkäinen asked concernedly. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, someone did hurt her,” Tom said tightly, looking up at the doctor again. He threw himself back into the conversation, trying not to think about what his realisation had told him. “I only arrived in time to stop him from killing her. He must have hit her in the stomach – I wasn’t aware of it. She didn’t tell me.” He swallowed hard. “What exactly happened to her?”

“Well... we aren’t quite sure. It seems as though one of the twins was damaged – foetus can heal alone, as we can, with time. However, it didn’t have the nutrition to heal completely, and continued to ask more of your wife’s body than she was capable of giving. The already weakened walls...” Lemminkäinen shook his head. “I don’t know. We’ve never seen anything like it.”

Of course you haven’t. This is the first baby you’ve come across that’s fucking evil.

“What happened?” Tom repeated.

“Her uterus wall collapsed inwards,” Lemminkäinen explained patiently. “It dragged several vein systems with it, bursting them, and scratched the surface of an artery.”

Tom’s face fell into his hands again, closing his eyes. I’ve killed her.

“Now, we need to discuss what can be done with her.”

Eyes dark like tunnels, Tom looked up.

“One foetus was crushed by the collapse – it’s too damaged to possibly survive. If we leave it, then, once the wall is healed, her body could automatically attempt a miscarriage, and kill the healthy child.” Lemminkäinen steeped his fingers and peered at Tom over the top of them.

Again, Tom wasn’t listening anymore. He had tuned out. An image had come to his mind – one baby died, the other survived. The moral one survived. The problem was solved. And then... a tiny, fragile person. Maybe Ginevra in miniature. His stomach lurched, and he bit his lip. It wasn’t fair. It was an image that he wanted so badly that it hurt... but was it worth risking the loss of Ginevra for? Of course not. Nothing was. And yet...

“...other option is to try to remove the harmed foetus without breaking the water around the healthy one...”

Tom frowned. He knew next to nothing about babies, and even less about giving birth to them, but even he could tell that Lemminkäinen’s other plan was impossible. “How the hell would that ever work?”

“It’s been tried before, but I was thinking something along the lines of magically manipulating the membrane that the babies are protected within – the ‘water’, so to speak – and thus encasing each foetus in two separate spaces... and then I could attempt to only remove the damaged one.”

“...Alright. Do it.”

“Listen for a moment,” said Lemminkäinen gravely. “Firstly, I am unsure that it will work. Secondly, it may already be too late. Thirdly, it is of a low probability that the foetus would survive to birth, and then it is highly possible that there may be a cot-death. Fourthly, if the healthy foetus does survive, it is unlikely that there would no side-effects.”

Side-effects? Anything sounds more appealing than psychosis.

“We can live with that-”

“And, finally,” Lemminkäinen continued, fixing Tom with a beady stare to let him know that he had not yet finished speaking, “...I simply don’t know if your wife is strong enough to survive.”

Tom’s words died in his words. That, he wouldn’t be able to live with. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t kill her for a baby that might die anyway, instead of saving her. But... if there was a possibility...

His lungs contracted, squeezing the air out until he couldn’t breathe.

Ginevra.

A baby.

The possibility of having neither.

The possibility of having both.

The possibility of maybe actually having a ‘happily ever after’ that everyone else seemed so determined to believe in when he knew that it was impossible.

The possibility that maybe it wasn’t so impossible.

Lemminkäinen was still watching him silently, pressurising him to decide... decide... decide... and the tick of the grandfather clock in the corner was as loud as the scream of a hurricane... decide... decide... decide...

He decided.

xxx

A/N: Dun-dun-dun. And, in answer to a random reviewer whose pen-name I forgot (sorry), Ginny's four and a half months pregnant as of now. Soooo the baby is due summer-ish. Like... July, maybe. I don't know. I don't do the maths thing. I got my report card and I got a D. Woop. A-star in English... 'Unmarkable' in Finnish. Nah, just kidding. I don't take Finnish. Be cool if I did though... Please review! Ignore my rambling.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Cat and Mouse

Ginevra. A baby. The possibility of having neither. The possibility of having both. The possibility of maybe actually having a 'happily ever after' that everyone else seemed so determined to believe in when he knew that it was impossible. The possibility that maybe it wasn't so impossible.

Lemminkäinen was still watching him silently, pressurising him to decide... decide... decide... and the tick of the grandfather clock in the corner was as loud as the scream of a hurricane... decide... decide... decide... He decided.

xxx

Pain was all that existed.

But other things were coming back to her now. Things like awareness, and sound, and feeling, and... and light...

Very slowly, with difficulty, Ginny opened her eyes.

She was lying in a bed in a room that, though mainly white in colour, was quite dark. The lamps were turned off, and the only light was coming through the crack in the door. Blinking to adjust her tired, battered eyes, she looked around. Things seemed to be moving strangely slowly, and blurred. Her vision throbbed in time with the ache in the bottom of her stomach.

A small smile came to her lips when she realised that the strange thing she could feel on her arm was in fact Tom, the side of whose face was resting lightly on her elbow, and from who she could hear the slowed-down breathing of sleep.

Not wanting to disturb him, she remained as still as possible... and then let out a loud and involuntary sneeze that hurt her stomach.

Damn.

Tom's head snapped upright, and he turned his face to look at her. His face was pale and tired, black half-moons under his eyes, and a dark shadow roughening his jaw; she regretted waking him up. He looked terrible – he probably needed that snooze.

"Hey, sleepy," she said, her voice raw – interrupting his frantic 'I'm sorry's and 'how long have you been awake's and 'how are you's. She frowned. "Where am I?"

"...Well, I actually... don't know," he admitted reluctantly, "but... it's a hospital, and it's in Finland – or at least, that's what I'm presuming from the fact that people continue to talk to me in Finnish, thinking that I would understand and be able to respond," he said wearily.

Her frown deepened. "Why couldn't you understand? I... I thought you said you could speak Finnish."

"Not enough, apparently." Tom smiled ruefully. "The crash-course that Alden sent me on neglected to teach me how to say: where's a hospital, my wife's abdomen just caved in."

"What?" Ginny's face crumpled, pained and not understanding what was happening. She was in a strange hospital, and she was in pain, and she wanted to go home. "I – but – I fell – what?"

As a way of explanation, Tom leaned back in the chair he was sitting in, and said bluntly, "The baby tried to kill you." He lifted his eyebrows, his eyes darkening with resentment. "I would hate to say 'I told you so'..." He looked at her in silence for a second, and then his gaze fell to the floor. "Why didn't you tell me that Terby hit you in the stomach?"

Her heart sank. Oh dear. She sighed. How could he not have found out – if Bernard had attacked her, and then two weeks later she collapsed with aggressive injuries, of course he would put two and two together. "I..." Talking was difficult. It required a great deal of breathing, and that made her stomach rise and fall, which hurt. "I didn't want you to worry."

“Instead, you thought that it would be less worrying to collapse screaming half-way through our honeymoon with internal bleeding.”

Ginny flinched guiltily, the action tensing her fragile body and causing pain to fire through her. “...What exactly happened?” she asked, not meeting his eyes.

“I’m not sure.” Tom looked at his hands, clasped together between his knees. “What I understand is that your abdomen caved in on the ... the twins - ...and you were bleeding internally, and one of the babies was crushed.”

Pain came with her short gasp of shock. Though she tried to contain her small cry, it flew involuntarily past her lips, and she drew her knees partly up at an effort to curl up into an instinctive ball. “But – then – what-” She wrapped her fingers tightly around his with an unexpected strength. “What’s going to happen to me?” she whispered.

“Nothing,” Tom reassured her, his voice soft, though Ginny thought that there was a slightly strained edge to it. “It’s already happened – it’s okay. They... they removed the damaged baby.”

Her eyes widened. “Then... there’s only one in me?”

It could be... the good baby. All of our problems would be solved.

Tom nodded curtly. “In short, yes.” He sighed heavily, pushing a hand through his hair. “You have to realise, though, Ginevra – it’s unlikely that it would survive... and we don’t even have any idea if... if it’s even the right one.”

Ginny’s lips formed a small ‘o’ of understanding. Of course... before the infant was born, it would be impossible to know if it was moral or immoral of the Slytherin twins. ...If it even survived to birth.

“Hey,” she said, her voice faint with exhaustion. She attempted to punch him lightly on the arm. “At least I’m alive, right?”

“At least you’re alive,” he agreed quietly, leaning over her, one hand curving to the contours of the side of her cheek, and kissing her gently. “I have had entirely enough of losing you.”

She looked up at him, her eyes soft with worry. Her gaze focused on his grey eyelids and the dark shadow smeary below them. “You look tired,” she said quietly, the tip of her finger moving to gently brush across the darkness.

“You look unwell,” he replied, his breath cool on her palm, his hand still curled around her cheek, the thumb of that hand stroking her cheekbone, “and that’s my priority.”

“I wish it wasn’t. You look dead on your feet.”

“Vampire?” A smile flickered on his lips.

“Maybe.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He kissed her exhausted eyelids.

“Tom,” she asked, eyes closed under his lips, fluttering open when he moved away to look at her again. Then, out of the blue, thoughtful, she hesitantly said, “what are we going to call it? Him, or her, or whatever?”

He remained standing, his face close to hers; he smiled. “We still have four months, Ginevra. There’s no hurry.”

“I’m just curious, though,” she said. “What do you think?” The faintest of grins flickered on her lips, and she said dramatically, “Horatio Riddle.” The melodramatic, sarcastic tone of her voice was slightly impaired by the fragility of her voice.

All that Tom said in reply to this teasing suggestion was a disapproving “Hm.”

“What was your dad’s name?” Ginny enquired.

“Tom.”

“Oh. Right.” She blushed, feeling stupid. “So there would be Tom Riddle Senior, Tom Riddle Junior, and Tom Riddle Junior Junior.” She pulled a face. “I’m not sure that’s going to work very well.”

Tom shifted slightly so that he was no longer standing; leaning his weight Ginny’s mattress but not sitting on it properly so as to disrupt her or make her uncomfortable. “I like James.”

“I like it.” Simple, but classy. She looked up into his face. “What about a girl?”

“I suggested James; you can choose a girl’s name,” he offered, lifting a hand to smooth stray red hair out of her pale face.

“Er... well, I was thinking... Evangeline?” she tried. “It sounds pretty.”

“It’s quite long,” Tom pointed out. “I’ll tell her to blame you if she’s picked on for being the last to learn to spell her name.”

“Hey,” she protested. “She could shorten it. Evangeline has lots of possibilities. She could be... Eva. Or Eve. Or Angie, or Lina... or... or Gel.”

“Well... what about Marianne?” he proposed contemplatively.

Be open-minded, be nice, be open-minded- She wrinkled her nose in reply.

“Fine,” Tom said, the softly affronted tone of his voice saying that he didn’t want to fight. “Evangeline it is, then.”

“We can always think of more names,” she reminded him, touching a finger lightly to his lips.

“True.”

For now, they settled for silence, and he reached to carefully hold her as she slept.

xxx

It was another soft, slow two weeks before the Finnish doctors deemed Ginny well enough to leave the hospital and Apparate home. It was a stumbling, confusing experience filled with strange languages and sprawling international buildings; she had never been so relieved to set foot back in England.

“Are you alright?” Tom checked after Apparating the final time, steadying her on her feet and helping her to the door.

“I’m fine.”

However, all of the colour drained from her face when she saw Alden sitting on a bench in the arrivals lounge, holding a cup of coffee and wearily glancing in the direction of where Tom and Ginny were. Those tired eyes focused on them, and then widened.

“Oh, dear,” she mumbled.

Alden muttered something to his wand, the movement of his lips forming what looked like the words ‘they’re here’, and then hurried towards them.

“Where the hell have you been?” Alden demanded angrily.

At his accusing tone, Ginny flinched into Tom’s side, pressing the side of her face into him.

“Not now, Philips,” Tom said, his low voice close to a growl, an arm wrapping protectively around her.

“You were supposed to come back two weeks ago!” the younger male ranted. “We spoke to the Finnish lodge where you were staying, and they said that you disappeared – and – and – we were so worried! Grace was in floods of tears – you have no idea what this did to her! And so close after...” His voice trailed off; Philippa was still taboo in their little group.

“I’m sorry,” she said feebly, her voice muffled by Tom’s coat. “Tell Grace and Luke I’m really sorry, and that I’m okay. I just... I had an accident. I’m tired, Alden, please.”

His expression softened slightly, though he looked offended at having her husband treat him like the enemy – Tom’s defensive hold on her had not relaxed, and she could not imagine that his famously hostile death stare would have either.

“Fine,” Alden grumbled reluctantly. “Grace is not going to be happy, though.” He looked for a moment as though he was going to try and give her a hug, but then his eyes flickered above her to Tom’s face, and he reasoned that it probably wasn’t such a good idea right now. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye,” Ginny said, and then Tom was moving quickly away, and she stumbled trying to follow him outside. He glanced down at her, his face stone, but his eyes reaching a thousand miles; he tightened his grip on her.

Crack.

They reappeared outside 21-5D Redrick Apartments, and Tom burrowed in his coat pocket for the key. Once unlocked, the door swung inwards, and they were home.

“Do you want anything?” Tom asked, closing the door behind them with his free hand.

She shook her head, her eyelids heavy. She managed to just about mumble, “Sleepy,” but she could say nothing coherent.

“Alright, come on.” He held her already-barely-conscious figure upright one-handed, while he removed her scarf and coat. “Shoes,” he told her, and she kicked them off, flailing her feet wildly to try and get them free of her boots. “Careful-” he lurched to grab her as her flailing caught her off-balance. “There we go.”

“Fnkyuw...” she tried to thank him, but it was mush and incomprehensible. Instead, she just let him guide her through the apartment to the bedroom, half-asleep.

She awoke fully, her hazel eyes snapping open, when she saw Bernard.

An involuntary scream tore from her lips, and she stood frozen, paralysed by panic. Then reality caught back up with her. In less than a few seconds, she found her back pressed up against the cold wall, Tom standing in front of her; one arm stretched out to his side, palm against the wall, completely shielding her from view, his other hand pointing his wand with lethal accuracy.

She didn't hear the incantation he snarled, but her retinas scarred purple for several seconds, and she cringed fearfully into Tom's back. She hated feeling weak, and yet she could feel nothing in her once-war-practiced body but terror.

Tom tensed in front of her.

Not understanding what was happening, Ginny cautiously peered around his side, her fingers curled into the material of the coat that he had not yet removed.

It was then that she saw that for some reason, Bernard was... flickering. He seemed to dance back and forth, always in exactly the same position, but sparking awkwardly.

An illusion, created by a magical projecting spell.

Finally, the illusion moved – looking up, not at Tom, but directly at Ginny. His words were, “Welcome back”, delivered quietly, mockingly. Almost proud. It then disappeared into nothingness.

Ginny did not yet move. She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe. She knew that Bernard's brief speech meant so much more than just the words. He was not welcoming her back to her apartment, back to London, from a long and exhausting honeymoon gone wrong. No. He

was welcoming her back into a cat and mouse that was never going to end until one or both of them were dead.

Moments passed.

It was not until Tom finally moved, stashing his wand in his coat, turning, and taking her face carefully in his cold hands, that she realised she was trembling.

xxx

A/N: Awww. Well, on a different note – OMG! I WATCHED TWILIGHT I WATCHED TWILIGHT I WATCHED TWILIGHT! I know I'm really sad, because he looked constipated and everything, but I melted everytime Jasper came on the screen. I love him. He is the best character in Twilight. I absolutely adore him to bits. And he was SO HOT when he was swinging that baseball bat. Seriously. Phwoarr. AND I GOT THE SOUNDTRACK! I'm listening to a combination of Bella's Lullaby and the prom song on repeat. They are so good. And my favourite ever band – Paramore, that is – wrote TWO songs for it! Honestly, I was squealing loudly when I recognised their new song 'I Caught Myself' in the bookshop with Jess and Angie. SQUEE. Wow, I'm so excited.

AND I WATCHED INDIANA JONES! THE NEW ONE! It had aliens! I've never seen any of the other films, even though they're a legend, like James Bond, except with less sex and more jungle, but still. AND THIS ONE HAD ALIENS! AND UKRAINIAN PEOPLE! I was in my element. I love Soviet accents. They're all like, 'yah, ve speak da Rushka'. YAY. I was considering taking Tom and Ginny to Ukraine for their honeymoon, but I thought that Finland was more romantic. And, by the way, I know that Finnish people read this, and I am so sorry. I know, I completely massacred your language. I am terrible person. It was all off a translating website, I tell you. BLAME THE INTERWEB. Still, I apologise for sticking Finnish with the sharpened end of a toothbrush and melting it to horrible mush. (: I am tres sincere.

Well, that's enough ranting. I could go on, but I doubt you have to patience. Now... UPDATE. I mean, REVIEW.

Xxx

Chapter Twenty-Three: Redemption

Finally, the illusion moved – looking up, not at Tom, but directly at Ginny. His words were, “Welcome back”, delivered quietly, mockingly. Almost proud. It then disappeared into nothingness.

Ginny did not yet move. She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe. She knew that Bernard's brief speech meant so much more than just the words. He was not welcoming her back to her apartment, back to London, from a long and exhausting honeymoon gone wrong. No. He was welcoming her back into a cat and mouse that was never going to end until one or both of them were dead.

Moments passed. It was not until Tom finally moved, stashing his wand in his coat, turning, and taking her face carefully in his cold hands, that she realised she was trembling.

xxx

It was a few more days after they arrived home to England that Ginny felt well enough to return to work. Louise and Beth's welcome was warm, and even Angeline gave her a begrudging, ‘back, are you?’

“Ohmigod!” Beth explained, her eyebrows flying up as she took in the redhead's position. “You're freakin' enormous!”

“It has been about a month, you know,” Ginny said, grinning broadly at her friend's blunt way of putting everything into perspective.. Then she pretended to pout. “And don't call me fat.”

Louise's lips twitched at this comment, but then her attention was quickly diverted by Will Gallantree passing behind her, winking at her, and saying, ‘hey blondie’. For a split-second she was frozen, not moving, and then she flushed scarlet, ducking her head.

“Ooh la-la,” Ginny and Beth chimed, wiggling their hips in bad impressions of posh French dames from the sixteenth-century. “How's it going, then?”

"I danced with him at your wedding," said Louise meekly as they traipsed down the corridor to their work-spaces. "And that's it, really."

"Pfft. You're boring. Just snog him. He so fancies you." Beth folded her arms across her chest, lifting her eyebrows.

Ginny had a flashback of her sixth-year Hogwarts days, and she couldn't help but smile.

"I told you so," sang Grace. "He fancies you. You should chuck Scott so that I can marry him, and then you should go with Riddle."

How little she had known at that point.

"What are you grinning at?" Beth asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," Ginny said, feeling embarrassed of her romantic sentiments.

"Hey, Peregrine," called Angeline, sashaying forwards. "Did you finish that last assignment you were set before your... er, union?" She was still sour about losing Tom to an inferior member of staff.

"Yeah, I gave it to Gladys."

"Hm." Angeline's brown eyes flashed sideways at Beth and Louise behind her. "Time for a new project, then, I suppose." She drummed her long, elegant fingers on a desk nearby, her other hand on her hip. "Next week is the fifth anniversary of the Muggle genocide in Oxford, London and Belfast. Find someone to write a heart-breaking article on it, and all that jazz. Organise an interview with my father, and he'll pass along the address and date to whoever he deems suitable."

Ginny had tuned out at the words 'Muggle Genocide'. That had been her cover-story. Home-schooled until her family was killed by the bombs in Ireland. Memories that she had long ago buried floated, half-forgotten but surprisingly vivid, up into the front of her consciousness.

Curled up in the corner, her back pressed against the wall, she watched in horror as her father cringed against the floor, blood spurting from his stomach. It was like a train-wreck – too horrible to bear, too alarming to look away. She stayed in the shadows, tears pouring silently down her cheeks. A scream built up, dry in her throat, but she made no noise. What good would it do to scream? And then at last, Arthur Weasley was still, and-

“-are you paying any attention to me, Peregrine?” Angeline demanded, her voice sharper than it had been a moment before. Her eyes flashed with irritation.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, her throat suddenly as parched as it had been in her memory, her voice lacking any lustre.

“Hand in the details by Friday at the very latest.” She eyed the youngest member of the Daily Prophet. “I know you like to cut things fine, but do try and be early.”

Ginny nodded, still not paying one-hundred-percent attention.

Angeline’s lips thinned, displeased with the redhead’s inattentiveness, but she had nothing else to say, and merely glared at Louise and Beth before disappearing into her office.

“Cow,” Beth muttered, scowling, and stalked away to her cubicle, leaving Ginny and Louise alone together.

Louise looked at Ginny through a curtain of blonde hair. “Are you alright?” she asked softly.

“Me?” she shrugged, trying to shake off her memories. “I’m fine, why?”

“You looked...” Louise hesitated, whether because she was trying to find a word or because she didn’t want to say it, Ginny didn’t know. Then: “...Never mind.” She hurried away.

Trying to work out what the blonde meant, Ginny stared after her, but then moved back to her 'office', still slightly shaken. She sank into her chair, staring blankly forwards at the wall, wondering...

"Go, Luna," Harry begged. "Please – you can't stay here a moment longer. I couldn't bear it if you were hurt." His green eyes were beseeching, desperate. Ginny thought with a hollow bitterness that he cared not if Ginny was hurt.

Luna, ditzy but obedient, nodded curtly, and grabbed Ginny's hand, tugging on her arm until she was forced to stumble blindly after the taller girl. "Luna-" she gasped out, her lungs raw with smoke. "Luna, we can't-" And as she twisted back to look at Harry one last time, emerald light from a Killing Curse lit the world green.

She certainly knew enough. More than most people. She'd been there. She'd seen... her stomach clenched tightly. Well, she'd seen a lot. Her hand trembling, she pulled a piece of parchment towards her and grabbed a quill from nearby. It took a while to find some ink, but she finally did, and she prepared for what was almost certainly a crazy attempt at getting a promotion, or at least praise, or... redemption.

Redemption.

She had given her heart to everyone and anyone who wanted it, in her own time-era. She'd had it shattered, piece by piece, as everyone who held part of it fell around her. And, piece by piece, had remembered what it was to be alive... but, never forgetting. And maybe, finally, she could...

Her quill hung poised over the parchment, and then she wrote.

It started slowly. A death here, a disappeared man there – in the papers. Nothing I understood. No-one I knew. Not important. Nothing of danger and destruction is ever of any important until it penetrates your safe, childish life. I lived in a warm, happy bubble. I had friends, and I had family. I did well at school. I had a nice boyfriend. Then I realised what blood was. It wasn't pain, or a paper cut, or a scratch on the numerous times when I fell over. It was the life of my best

friend, seeping away from her and draining through the cracks in the floor. She was the first to go...

And she poured her heart out.

xxx

Ginny wasn't particularly brilliant at writing. She knew the alphabet, and she knew how they fitted together into meaningful, coherent sentences, but that was really as far as it went. She had Alden check over her article, knowing that he would be able to read through her work, edit it, and not feel the need to ask a hundred questions. He only asked one:

"Were you asked to write this?"

"No," she had replied quietly, looking at her tangled hands.

She would have asked Tom to edit it, but in the case of anything happening with this article, she wanted it to be a surprise for him to see it.

Though she was aware that Angeline had wanted the work in earlier than Friday, and that it was the last possible date to hand it in, that was when Ginny had it prepared in time for. She was still nervous, though, as she would have to lie about the author – a lot – and Angeline almost always saw straight through her.

Fortunately, for some reason or another, Angeline wasn't in work on Friday, and Edward Storne came down to supervise his daughter's job. Ginny's relief was an ocean at high tide, washing over her. Storne liked her. This would be easy.

"Hi," she said, throwing on a 'sir' for good measure. "Er, I was told to book an interview with someone about the Muggle genocide thing, but they didn't answer my owls, so I went to talk to them personally about an interview, but when I saw them they handed me the written article, so..." Ginny said this all quite quickly, feeling red colour cheeks. She was getting out of practice with lying. She was really going to have to improve. "Here it is."

She stuck her hand out, biting her lip anxiously as Storne took the booklet of parchment and flipped through it. His eyes flickered across the pages, scan-reading the paragraphs as if they were only a few words each, as opposed to big, wordy sentences.

“This,” Storne said, snapping the booklet shut and holding it up, “is fantastic.”

Ginny flushed scarlet and was about to make a modest thank-you or something of the kind, when she caught herself, remembering that she ‘hadn’t written it’. Allegedly.

“Poignant, you know. I like it.” He scrutinised the front page. “But... where’s the author’s name?”

“Er.” Ginny scratched the back of her neck. “Oh. They must not have written their name.”

“Well, who was it?” he pressed.

“I... I forgot.”

“Find out, girl!” Storne said exasperatedly, but in good humour. He handed the booklet back to her, and added, “Come and see me in Angie’s office when you’ve found out.” He winked conspiratorially at her. “You don’t want us to get sued, do you?”

Ginny blinked at him. “Um. I guess not.” She turned away from him, and moved back towards her cubicle, her heart pounding. She hadn’t been found out – yet. But here was the problem... she needed to make a fake name. Or else pretend that the author wished to be anonymous. Yes, that would work.

“Whatcha got there?” Beth drawled, sitting on a nearby swivel chair with a cup of coffee.

“Not much. Just some manuscript.” Ginny held it up for them to see, and then tucked it under her arm as she looked through her filing

cabinet, though she knew full-well that her searching was pointless. It was all for show.

Then, she heard from behind her: “That’s your handwriting.”

Ginny froze. Then her panic subsided. Louise had a soft voice – there was no possible way that Storne could have heard her. Unless he was a bat or a dolphin or something. Secretly. Under his suit.

“Jesus, Ginny, you wrote all that?” Beth yelled loudly.

She froze again. Crap.

Counting to ten in her head, she only reached six before-

“Miss Peregrine?”

I repeat, once more... crap.

She trailed fearfully back to her employer, already flinching in preparation of the telling-off she was sure to receive. However, she didn’t immediately receive anything but a calm, calculating gaze on her face. He took the parchment from her, and held it in front of her. “Did you write this?” His expression was not angry; merely curious.

She shifted awkwardly. “Yes, sir.”

“You made all of this up?”

“No, sir.” She looked down at her. “It’s all true.” Even if I wish that it wasn’t.

Storne flipped through it again, and then looked at her closely. “Not bad,” he commented off-handedly, when he finally spoke. He lifted his eyebrows at her. “I’ll get back to you about this.” Then, with a twitch of a smile, he headed back into his daughter’s office – taking the article with him.

Ginny’s heart jumped in her chest.

Redemption.

xxx

An unusual thing happened on Wednesday, the eleventh of April. Ginny woke up early – so early that Tom wasn't even awake yet, let alone busy as he normally was.

She glanced across at her husband (she still got a thrill at that word), her eyes lingering on his sleep-soft face, his stomach rising and falling lightly with quiet snores. She slipped away, clicking the bedroom door shut behind her with barely a sound.

She padded across the living floor with bare feet, to the window, where the Daily Prophet was waiting on the sill. Edward Storne had given no indication of his choice regarding her article, and she suspected that now, on the day, she would finally find out.

Unfolding it, the headline screamed FIFTH YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF DEVASTATION. Her eyes scanned the text beneath it... and her heart sank in disappointment.

It wasn't there.

Just in case, she flicked to the next page – and there it was.

A smile broke out on her face as her gaze fell upon sentences and paragraphs that she remember writing, only a week ago. And there, at the top, in small italic letters, the words: Article by Ginevra Riddle.

She hugged the newspaper to her, and then skipped back through to the bedroom, flinging the door wide open.

Tom was already awake (she must not have been as quiet as she had imagined), kneading his eyes with his knuckles. He blinked up at her, scratching his head. "Where's the fire?" he asked, smirking.

"Look," she said, hopping up next to him, and handing him the newspaper.

He took it from her, and there was a pause while he read the name at the top and the first few sentences, and then he looked over at her in surprise. She nodded, smiling shyly. Wordlessly, he curled an arm around her waist, pulling her back into his shoulder, holding her while he read.

There was a long silence. Ginny looked up at Tom's face, studying his expression as he slowly digested everything she'd written – everything she'd felt, at one point, a long time ago.

Before she met him.

Or after she met him, whichever way you wanted to look at it.

A pang of worry and guilt hit her in the stomach. This was something that she hadn't considered in a long time.

She was married to the Dark Lord. And pregnant.

Tearing her eyes from his face, she curled up against him, staring blankly forwards, thoughtful. By the time that Tom finished reading her article, and was hugging her tightly, kissing her temple, murmuring, "Are you alright?", she had decided.

She was going to tell him. Everything.

But first, she was going to the Burrow.

xxx

A/N: Thanks to everyone who reviewed – especially those who liked my rant. Sorry for those who hate them, but I have a lot to say. Because, truly, you haven't seen good TV until you've seen Harrison Ford climb into a fridge and survive a nuclear blast. Sexy. Now a fridge with Tom Riddle in... wa-hey. –evil grin- Also, I'd like to point out that Possibly-Baby-James is not going to turn out to be James Potter and all that jazz. That would just be creepy. Then Ginny would have fancied her own grandson. Plus, Tom isn't called Tom Potter, so that's physically impossible.

In answer to Sarah1281, yeah, the baby was sort of like, 'crap, well, if I'm screwed, then I'm taking you with me'. Basically.

Cmileyfreaky, no, I'm still alive. :D Anyway, I wouldn't let a little thing like being dead stop me from writing.

Morning-Sunset: tell your crazy friend thank you for making my day. I have not laughed like that in ages.

I said the most amazing joke today, right? Get this.

What's so interesting about Wales? What does it have?

Whales!

HAHAHA. I'm so funny. I really should have my own show. Admit it, you'd love a show all about me. Well, REVIEW.

Xxx

Chapter Twenty-Four: Unchanging

There was a long silence. Ginny looked up at Tom's face, studying his expression as he slowly digested everything she'd written – everything she'd felt, at one point, a long time ago. Before she met him. Or after she met him, whichever way you wanted to look at it. A pang of worry and guilt hit her in the stomach. This was something that she hadn't considered in a long time. She was married to the Dark Lord. And pregnant.

Tearing her eyes from his face, she curled up against him, staring blankly forwards, thoughtful. By the time that Tom finished reading her article, and was hugging her tightly, kissing the top of her head, she had decided. She was going to tell him. Everything. But first, she was going to the Burrow.

xxx

The instant that the heavy black doors swung inwards, Ginny was hit by a wave of grief. She didn't know if it was an enchantment set up to get the whole feel of a funeral right, or if it was really so miserable in the chapel, but she honestly felt like suicide.

She held onto Tom, but his hand was lifeless in hers; when she glanced up at him, she saw that he was staring straight ahead, his face set as stone. She followed his gaze.

Philippa's casket.

Her shoulders tensed upon realising what his line of thought was, and she tugged him away sideways so that he could no longer stare at... his undoing.

"Hey, Grace, Alden," Ginny said quietly, letting go of Tom's hand to hug her friends. Alden acknowledged her with a wordless nod, a flicker of a remorseful smile flashing across his lips; Grace looked determinedly in a different direction. Ginny sighed. "Grace, please don't do this," she whispered. "Not now. I said I was sorry. I didn't mean to make you worry so much. Please."

Grace's blue eyes met Ginny's hazel ones. She was silently accusing, unhappy. Then, finally, she said, "If something had happened, I would have had no-one left."

Alden frowned at her, but Ginny knew why the brunette had not included him. It was hard to be best friends with someone who you loved with all your heart, but who you knew didn't want you.

"Luke?" Ginny reminded her.

Grace's lips twisted sideways, and her eyes flashed to Alden. Ginny understood that as well.

"I'm really sorry," she mumbled, lowering her eyes.

"It's fine," Grace said stiffly, and then she stepped forwards and stooped to give her shorter friend a hug. She looked closely at Ginny, and then her gaze moved away from her. "Where's Romeo?"

Ginny noticed that he was no longer by her side, and turned to find him. He was standing a metre or two behind her, being questioned by a portly man who looked to be some distant relation of Philippa.

"How did you know our Pip, then?" the man was saying, mopping at his eyes with a handkerchief.

Tom shifted, uncomfortable. He didn't look the man in the face as he muttered, "Wife's friend."

"Oh, did you ever meet her, then? Or have you just been dragged along with the madam?" the Decrow chuckled half-heartedly. Trying to be cheerful despite the death of his relative, he nudged Tom with his elbow. "Eh?" He sighed heavily. "At least I have some good last memories of her."

At this last comment, Tom went rigid, staring blankly forwards as though he hadn't heard. His face was concrete, but Ginny didn't need any emotions to read to know that he was remembering... his last memory of Philippa.

Before he killed her.

She moved swiftly to stand beside Tom, gripping his cold hand. “Hi,” she said to the Decrow who had been talking at – not to – her husband, and then added, “Sorry,” before pulling him away. She glanced over her shoulder, and then looked up at Tom, studying his strong, pale face. “Are you okay?”

His eyes flashed down to meet hers, but they were a closed shutter, dark and cold. “Give a reason why I wouldn’t be,” he said, his voice quiet but coated with frost.

Her shoulders slumped. “Don’t be like that, for heaven’s sake. Even if you’re upset, you can still be normal.”

For a second, he was silent, just looking at her. Then, he said, his tone similarly cold, “I am being normal.”

And Ginny realised that he was telling the truth. The coldness and shallow spite in his voice wasn’t something she had never seen before. It was exactly the same as how everyone else – excluding her, normally – saw him. It was the Tom Riddle that others recognised. Her heart sank.

It was the Tom Riddle he had been before she changed him.

“Fine,” she said resignedly, giving in. She kept hold of his hand, and while he did not hold hers, he didn’t pull his hand away. He wasn’t completely lost, then.

They moved back to where the others, and it just a few minutes before everyone was called upon to sit for the funeral service. Silence echoed before Philippa’s parents began, tears streaking their faces, voices shaking – every octave crack especially obvious in the magnified acoustics of the small chapel. Mrs. Decrow had to sit down, reduced to tears by her own speech, and her husband continued for her. Then it was a grandfather, an uncle, Alden, Grace... Ginny.

She moved to the front with shaky limbs.

“There was a point in my life when I was suicidal,” she began bluntly. At these words, she saw Tom flinch in her peripheral vision – this wasn’t something that she had ever told him. “I’m not going to pretend that it wasn’t a bad time. I actually got to point of... of killing myself. Of jumping. I was actually on the windowsill. And I... I even jumped.” She swallowed, hard. “Pippa was there. And she caught me. With one foot still, barely, on the sill; dragged me back in. She saved my life, and even though she was furious, she understood.”

Tears blurred her eyes as she remembered. ‘You really love him, don’t you?’ Philippa had said. She recalled the crying, the lack of needing to explain. However, crying reminding her of her own tears – standing in her living room – screaming – anguish, pain, written across Tom’s face – and she bit down on her lower lip.

It was a moment before she felt well enough to look up at audience. She knew enough about public speaking to know that eye-contact was necessary. She scoured the crowd with her hazel eyes, and then her heart dropped down, past her stomach, somewhere in the floor.

Bernard smiled at her.

She struggled to breathe, and then she forced herself to rip her eyes away from him.

He went to school with Pippa. He’s perfectly entitled to be here. He doesn’t have to be here for any reason. He’s just... he’s just... She knew that he would be able to hear all of this, but she didn’t care. Breathe. Calm down. Breathe.

She was no longer really paying attention to her words. She was aware that they must be forced, fake. She tried to sound emotional, but any sadness was drowned out by fear pounding like thunder in her ears. Applause made her aware that it was time to sit down, as she moved back to Tom as though in a waking dream.

A waking nightmare.

Her husband’s dark, still-distant eyes followed her as she sat down, but said nothing. A detached coldness remained in his expression.

She waited until everyone around them was focused on the next speaker, and then leaned slightly towards him; she muttered, "He's here."

He gave her a look of polite disinterest, obviously not understanding. It was strange to see him so different – and yet, so the same. Ginny sat back in her chair, slumping. She couldn't be bothered to try and explain that Bernard was less than fifteen metres away. Perhaps it was better that Tom didn't know, anyway.

Some other people spoke next. A few were people that Ginny recognised, but mostly they weren't. She tried to pay attention and feel appropriately sorrowful, but she couldn't.

Flowers – weeping family – black mourning gowns – it was a blur. They moved into the lobby of the chapel for the wake of the funeral, bittersweet and dark wine being passed around. Kids In Glass Cauldrons was recognisable, playing in the background. Sympathetic murmurs were the most common sound – until, that is, Bernard appeared nearby, from the crowd as though it had parted specifically for him.

A shallow (but very audible) hiss of air rushed into Tom's lungs, causing everyone in the vicinity to look at him in surprise. Of course, their shock only deepened seeing him step in front of Ginny, his face viciously hostile, lip curled back. It was an expression of alarming hatred.

"Tom, how good to see you," said Bernard, smiling gloriously as he approached them.

The older Slytherin said nothing, but he exhaled sharply, the noise more like a growl than anything else. He was fixed, tensed, before Ginny, shielding her from view.

"No, please," she whispered, clinging to his arm and looking around them. "Don't – not now. Please, Tom."

Everybody around them seemed to have frozen, astonished. No-one knew quite what to make of the situation – a funeral wake suddenly morphing into a silent battle of aggressive testosterone.

Very slowly, Tom straightened up, drawing himself up to full, terrifying height. “Terby,” he ground out. Ginny moved to his side again so that their position was less defensive, and from there she could see the muscle jumping in his taut jaw, his self-control barely overcoming the fury burning like lit oil in his eyes.

Bernard said nothing; he merely smiled pleasantly at them. After their little audience realised that there was nothing more to see, they shuffled away, and it was only once the wake was continuing its misery that Bernard continued speaking to them.

“How are you, Ginny?” he asked, his tone cheerful. He tilted his head. “So it’s true,” he commented. “Pregnant women do seem to radiate a natural beauty.”

At she that moment, she was pretty sure that the only thing she was radiating was poison.

He stretched out a hand towards Ginny, resting it on her cheek, but her angry exclamation was drowned out: “Don’t touch her,” Tom snarled, perhaps at a louder volume than was necessary, again attracting attention.

Bernard chuckled, dropping his hand to his side and putting it in his pocket. “Your reactions really are priceless,” he told Tom. “Points for enthusiasm. I can actually see how much effort it’s taking you to restrain from just killing me here, in front of all these people.” He laughed again. “Now wouldn’t that be funny? Because then everyone here would realise how their beloved Philippa really died.”

Ginny flinched; Tom didn’t answer, but for a quiet noise of his teeth grinding together that made her cringe with sympathetic pain.

The younger male sighed, his glass-green eyes flickering over the faces of people nearby. “They all know they’re being lied to,” he said softly. “Mugged? As though anyone believes that. Philippa Decrow

was murdered – and rather brutally at that. ...I wonder what they'd make of that."

"You wouldn't dare," Ginny growled, her eyes narrowing.

"Wouldn't I? They deserve to know. It's only right that they should know that the foul murderer of their daughter - or friend, or niece, or grandchild – is standing less than a few metres away, sipping wine as though he belongs-"

Everything moved too quickly for Ginny to understand then, blurring in front of her, a haze of shouting and confusion. All she knew was that Tom lunged forwards, his wineglass smashing loudly on the floor, and then someone nearby screamed, people were panicking – there was the red of blood, a howl of pain – and for one terrible moment, Ginny thought that her husband had stabbed Bernard.

"Tom!" she cried, grabbing him. She pushed him backwards, holding his arms tightly. He struggled, his eyes past reason, loathing like flames across his face. Once he was suitably contained, she looked over to see Bernard sprawled on the floor, blood streaming freely from his nose, his jaw at a strange and uncomfortable angle. Relief flooded through her. She glanced at Tom. "Come on, let's go."

Grace and Alden stared with wide eyes, the only calm in a room full of frightened people. Ginny ignored them, and put all of her weight into pushing Tom from the room, calling, "I'm really sorry," over her shoulder to Mr. and Mrs. Decrow.

Tom was breathing hard through his nose, his chest heaving, his face still wildly furious. He said nothing, but let himself be steered from the chapel. They Apparated back to their apartment, and Ginny let herself in.

She watched Tom storm past, kicking the wall – a dent appeared, and paint crumbled away – and glaring at the floor.

She closed the door behind her and waited, but several minutes passed in silence. Finally, a sigh tore from her lips. "Please say something," she said.

“What can I possibly say?” he ground out.

“Anything?”

“Fine. Fine. What do you honestly want to hear?” He spun back to stare challenging at her, eyes flashing. “Well, the funeral of one of your best friends, who I killed – that was fun! We should do it again sometime! And, let’s face it, Ginevra, we will.”

“What?” She blinked, confused. She had been expecting him to rant angrily about Bernard, and be irritated at her for not letting him rip him into small pieces. This was... unexpected. Confusing.

“I’m not going to change.” Tom raked a hand roughly backwards through his hair. He exhaled sharply. “I’m better than I was, I’ll give myself that much – it’s not every day, not every week... not even every month – but it still happens.” So suddenly that for a moment she was frightened, he grabbed her face, holding her still and forcing her to look straight at him. “How long can this go on? I’m always going to be like this.”

“I don’t care!” she exclaimed, incredulous that his rage had come back to this, of all things.

“You don’t care?” he echoed, letting go of her face. “What kind of person can you be, to chose me, knowing that you’re endangering the lives of everyone around you?”

“The kind of person that you married,” she felt she had to point out. “If you have problems with me, then you probably should have considered them before then. It’s a little bit late now.”

He glared at his feet. “You don’t care...” he muttered darkly, fuming.

“No, I don’t,” she said gently, reaching up to put her hands on his shoulders, touching her lips lightly to his. “Why do you?”

“Because someone has to,” he said fiercely. “And because I don’t want to have to look into your face while the people you love die, one

by one, each followed by another. Because of me. And you would put on a brave face, I know you would. I don't want to see..." He bit down on his bottom lip. "And, answer this, Ginevra; what happens when I run out of people to hurt? When there's no-one else nearby? What if one day... it's you?"

She looked at him unhappily. She didn't like the way this conversation was going. "That's a risk I'm willing to take."

"No," he snarled, his eyes livid. "That's not a risk I'm willing to take."

Cross, she folded her arms across her chest and pouted at him, lifting her chin defiantly. "Well, I'm not going anywhere, so unless you're going to walk out on a pregnant girl, then you're stuck with me."

A pained expression twisted Tom's face. She knew exactly what was going through his head at that moment – him thinking that walking out would be so much safer for her, something that he wanted more than anything else, but loving her too much, being too selfish, to ever think about it.

She laughed, shaking her head. "And don't even try to pretend you're considering it," she said, twining her arms around his neck. She pressed her lips to his, but he was frozen, distressed, under her touch. She sighed as she withdrew, realising that he wasn't going to let this go.

"Bernard was right," he muttered. "The Decrows deserve better than this. They deserve to know who killed their daughter."

She held him at arm's length; eyebrows raised, her expression serious, she informed him, "If you turn yourself in, then the Dementor's Kiss or Azkaban will be nothing compared to what I will do to you. I will throw you out of this apartment, let you grovel on the streets for a while, and then I will kill you, tear you into pieces, burn the pieces, perform a Satanic ritual around your ashes to make sure that your next reincarnation is cursed, bring you back to life, and then I will reprimand you and make you feel disappointed with yourself."

Despite himself, the corner of Tom's lips twitched. "I promise you I will not turn myself in."

She grinned. "We sound like the mafia."

His expression was stone again. "We may as well be the mafia. No regard whatsoever for who you hurt during your rampages," he said bitterly.

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Let it go." She shook his shoulders. "I love you, okay? And the only way you are going to hurt me is by me feeling guilty when I slap you for being so damn miserable."

He stared down into her eyes. His words were blunt and simple. "What is next time it's Hartwin?"

She knew that he was trying to gouge a reaction out of her, and though she attempted to deliberately stay calm, she involuntarily dragged in a gasp of horror and pain. Her hand flew halfway to her mouth in shock before she wrestled it back to her side.

"I'm sorry." Tom closed his eyes, leaning down until his forehead touched hers. "You just... you don't seem understand. Even now – earlier, in the chapel... it was – it was so hard... I knew that losing control at that moment would be terrible, and that there was a possibility that I might even hurt you... but still, it..." His face screwed up slightly. When he spoke next, his voice was strained, as though it physically hurt to confess weakness. "I almost gave in."

"You didn't, though, did you?" she said brightly, trying to lighten the mood.

He gave her a long, calculating look, as though attempting to work out if she was being serious. "I shattered just about every bone in his face."

True, admittedly, but... "Still, could be worse."

“Could be a hell of a lot better, as well,” he grumbled under his breath, but he said no more on the subject, simply putting his arms around Ginny, holding her tightly in his arms, kissing the top of her head.

However, the redhead was distracted with another problem. Her plans to find the Burrow. Her plans to tell Tom everything – including her future; including what would have been his future. If he reacted so badly to the pain he caused her by killing one of her friends, then hearing that he had become Lord Voldemort and slaughtered her whole family would probably drive him to suicide.

Her stomach tightened in dread.

xxx

A/N: Aw, you didn't really think she'd be going to the Burrow just yet, didcha? Hah, fool. Bleh. I have little to say here. I got full marks on my Drama essay and an A on my biology GCSE module. Sexy. Please review!! Love you all.

Xxx

Chapter Twenty-Five: Run A Mile

“Could be a hell of a lot better, as well,” he grumbled under his breath, but he said no more on the subject, simply putting his arms around Ginny, holding her tightly in his arms, kissing the top of her head.

However, the redhead was distracted with another problem. Her plans to find the Burrow. Her plans to tell Tom everything – including her future; including what would have been his future. If he reacted so badly to the pain he caused her by killing one of her friends, then hearing that he had become Lord Voldemort and slaughtered her whole family would probably drive him to suicide.

Her stomach tightened in dread.

xxx

She set off for the Burrow at twenty minutes past midnight. It was a dark night... an even darker apartment... and an even darker bedroom, rigged with chairs and doors and windows and other potentially dangerous obstacles. Ginny began to see a flaw in her plan.

Careful to be quiet so as not to wake Tom, sprawled out somewhat untidily on his back beside her, she slipped away. There was a soft thump as his left hand, stretched over his body, fell away from her ribs and hit the mattress. She winced at the noise – her husband was an exceptionally light sleeper – but continued through the gloom, tripping over a cardboard box that she vaguely recalled looking through the evening before for a certain green shirt.

Despite all of her efforts at being quiet, there was the soft sound of someone stirring, and from the darkness, she heard a sleepy mush of what sounded like, “Whasgonon...”

“Nothing,” she whispered. “Sssh. I’m just sneaking out to the house where I’ll be born approximately thirty years into your future, because I want to steal a Weasley heirloom for the baby.”

There was a short pause, and then Tom rolled over, mumbling, "Mmkay..."

She smiled at him, and then continued on her way. She thought that she had nearly reached the door when she walked face-first into it.

"Bequieew...." sounded grumpily from the bed.

Ginny sat in a heap on the floor, rubbing her forehead. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Firstly, she was going to kill herself falling over stuff, and secondly, she realised that it was kind of stupid going to the Burrow in the middle of the night. The people who lived there would all be present, and if they woke up, then she'd be in deep trouble. It was probably a better idea to go in the daytime.

Groaning at the wasted time and pointless bruise on her face, she staggered to her feet and stumbled back.

xxx

"What happened to your head?"

Ginny frowned. She lifted up a hand to inspect her forehead, and felt a large swollen lump. Oh. She remembered that now. "Er. I don't know," she lied, her eyes flickering shiftily.

"Hm." Tom considered this. "Fine. Don't tell me."

She winced. Was she that easy to see through? She hoped not. Then again, she'd known for a while now that she needed more practice at lying. "I walked into the door in the middle of the night," she said honestly.

He rolled his eyes. "Only you." He set his hands down on the table beside where she was eating, tilting his head sideways to kiss the bruise, and then her lips. "You would think I would have woken up," he mused.

"You did."

“Oh.” He frowned. “Well. I’ll take your word for it.”

She grinned at him, before stuffing the remainder of her breakfast into her mouth. Once finished, she took her plate through to the kitchen, performing a spell so that it cleaned itself, and then skipped through the living room to find her shoes. It was ten minutes until she had to leave when she found them hiding under the sofa; it was then another five minutes retrieving them, as the size of her stomach made it impossible to get low enough to the ground for her arm to be able to reach the shoes. In the end, Tom got them for her, smirking bemusedly at her handicap.

“Thank you, good sir,” she said, nodding, and then continued with getting ready.

As per norm, they were set to depart for work at roughly the same time (roughly, due to the fact that Ginny was almost always somewhat later than Tom), and left the apartment together, pretending to just engage in general conversation if anyone from the neighbouring apartments was nearby, and Apparating immediately if not.

“I’ll see you later,” Tom said, giving her a hug carefully and kissing the top of her head.

“Mm-hm.”

He let go, and a small smile flickered across his lips before he Disapparated. Ginny watched him go, and then heaved a sigh.

Well, here we go.

She took a deep breath, and concentrated, forcing herself to visualise Ottery St. Catchpole as it had been before the War, not burning and broken. It was hard, and she stood stock-still in the middle of the corridor struggling for longer than she would have liked, but, very slowly, she wavered out of view.

One thing that she had forgotten about her old town was that it was very bright. She held a hand up to her eyes to shield them from the

glare, and squinted out across the small dirt road where she'd appeared. Ottery St. Catchpole rose on a hillside in the distance, and from even being this far away, she could detect the Lovegood household, the Diggory house, and... the Burrow.

Her heart swelled with a bittersweet combination of happiness and pain.

Ginny straightened her skirt and made her way through the town to what had, for so long, been her village, her home. It was exactly the same as it always had been before the fighting begun, only slightly more new-looking, and slightly more old-fashioned.

The Burrow was also identical, except that it was painted an old, peeling brown, instead of the beige that her generation of Weasleys had repainted it when she was six. She recalled Ron spraying her with paint, Fred and George tipping a bucket on his head. Her heart hurt again.

When she was close enough, she hid in the shadow of an abandoned house, pointed her wand at the Weasley house, and performed a Searching Charm to see if anyone was inside.

It was blissfully empty.

She stashed her wand in her back pocket and moved swiftly and surely towards her old house. She scaled the garden fence with ease, remembering which were the best footholds, not to grab the ivy, avoid the middle plank because it was wobbly – and then she landed with a soft thump in the back garden.

For a moment she simply looked around in nostalgia, noting the pond, over-crowded with squabbling ducks, and the gnomes, eyeing her with some trepidation from their nests. The grass was overgrown and unkempt, and there were small toys scattered across the ground.

Carefully, she picked her way up to the house. It was not locked with anything more defensive than a key, which she easily disabled with a whispered 'alohamora'. The main enchantment on the house was a

ward to keep out any non-Weasleys unless identified as guests. It was of this that Ginny was not entirely sure.

Did she still count as a Weasley?

She was anti-Gryffindor, to the extent of being a Slytherin; she had been a Peregrine, and then a Riddle, in turn; she had not lived in the Burrow for over four years, since it had been burned down, and she had returned to the past.

Dragging a deep breath in, she stepped over the threshold.

And nothing happened.

She released her pent-up breath in a whoosh, and a grin broke out over her face. It meant a lot to her, that, deep down, she was still a Weasley.

The table in the centre of the kitchen was round, and smaller than she was used to, two of the three chairs balanced high with cushions, presumably to lift small children higher. The strange family clock on the wall did not depict the nine Weasleys she knew, but rather small images of Septimus Weasley, his wife Cedrella, their elder son, Bilius – for whom Ron was named, and in the picture, appeared to be about ten – and their younger child... Arthur.

She stared at the photograph, seeing her father with new eyes. He looked to be around five or six, with a lot of red, curly hair. He had a silly expression on his face, giggling, as though he had been distracted by something immaturely amusing. He didn't yet have glasses, nor the world-weary expression on his face of someone who had seen too many winters.

Ginny forced herself to look away, and pushed on. She left the kitchen, hurrying up the stairs two at a time. She knew exactly what she was looking for, and she knew exactly where it was. She moved into what had been her parents' room, and was now clearly where her grandparents slept. She crossed to the wardrobe, and stood on tiptoe, reaching for what she knew was hidden away on the top of it, out of the reach of wandering children.

Her cheeks burned when she realised that she was still not tall enough, and she went to fetch her grandmother's dressing-table chair. Standing on it, she could see a small box. She retrieved it.

It was small, about the size of both her hands close together, and half as tall. Coloured bright reds and yellows and purples, it seemed to scream the perfect toy. And it was. It always had been.

Still standing on the stool, Ginny pushed the lid of the box carefully open, and a smile broke out on her face as she saw the familiar figurines begin to dance. The miniature ringmaster, the tiny elephants, the petite ballerina, the small clown, the little dancing dog. A tinkly tune rang in the background, resonating from deep within the box, and magically, the figures pirouetted and twisted – their dance steps never repeated, no matter how times she opened the box. It was always different... as though they were real.

She only realised that her eyes were blurring with tears when the song came to a close, and then she wiped her face fiercely. She took the box, tucking it under her arm. In its place she left a letter. It was not addressed to anyone, though she realised that she probably could have written: to Arthur, in forty years' time. She didn't though.

It simply said:

When you're ready to believe.

xxx

The instant that Tom walked through the door, he found himself ambushed. Ginny threw herself at him, covering his eyes. "Don't look!" she squeaked.

"I'm not looking," Tom said, taken aback and confused. "Why, what's happening?"

"Come and see!"

"I thought that I wasn't allowed to look."

She glowered at him, though of course he couldn't see that.

"Can I take my coat off first?" he asked amusedly, and she could feel his smirk beneath her small fingers.

"Maybe." She shuffled around him so that he could remove his coat, all the while keeping her hands firmly over his eyes, which was proving difficult, as he was a good head and a half taller than her, and she had to strain on tiptoes even to reach him. Also, he was deliberately teasing her by lifting his head and pretending to try and see past her.

"Right, I'm ready." He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Lead me on, O Wise One."

Grinning, she walked backwards through the apartment pulling him with her, and then stopped by the dining room table. She let go of his face. "Voila."

Tom looked down at the circus box sitting on the table. He didn't say anything, but took a few steps closer and flicked the box lid open. His expression softened the confusion away as the figurines began to dance, twining elegantly under their mirrored ceiling.

She linked her elbow through his and peered up at his face. "You like it?" she asked.

"It's... cute."

Ginny's jaw dropped, staring at her. She had been surprised when he said she was beautiful. She had been amazed when she kissed her. She had been stunned when he asked her out. She had been shocked when he asked her to marry her. But this really took the biscuit.

Never, in all of her days, had she thought she'd ever hear the Dark Lord say that something was cute.

She flinched inwardly at this. No. He wasn't the Dark Lord. He was many things – husband, father, best friend, insecure, possessive, beautiful – but he was not the Dark Lord. He never had been, and now he was never going to be. That, she was certain of.

"What?" he asked, self-conscious.

To cut off her giggling, she clapped a hand to her mouth. "You said 'cute'!" she exclaimed.

He shrugged, smirking. "Sue me. I told you Fionn would leave permanent damage." He leaned down to kiss her. "It's nice, Ginevra. I like it." He picked it up and turned it in his hands, observing it. "Where did you get it from?"

"Oh." She flushed red. She should have guessed that question would come. "It used to belong to my grandfather," she said honestly.

"...Why does it say Weasley?"

Crap. She had never thought to actually check that it didn't have any discriminating give-aways on it. "I'm distantly related to them," she said, which was also true in a way. Her Slytherin side came out, and she said, "I know, ew," but then guilt struck her deep in her chest.

Tom didn't say anything.

"Hey?" she said, twisting to face him. "What's up?"

He was frowning, his brow very furrowed. He wasn't paying attention to her anymore. It was his expression of utmost concentration, when he was working something out. Occasionally, he mumbled, "Weasley," under his breath.

"What's going on? Weasley what?" she asked.

He still said nothing.

"Tom?"

“Molly,” he muttered.

“Excuse me?”

He suddenly broke free of his thinking stupor, and looked up, from the circus box in his hands, directly into her eyes. There was a realisation in the back of his eyes. And he said, very clearly, “Ginevra Molly Weasley.”

She froze, rock-solid, every muscle in her body going rigid.

He didn’t wait for her to answer. He continued, still in his paused, broken-up, thinking voice. “Molly – your parents – you said they were called Arthur and Molly. Wellvren Sayoley G. She mentioned Lord Voldemort. ‘I am Lord Voldemort’ is an anagram of my name... Tom.... Marvolo... Riddle. ‘I am Wellvren Sayoley G’... Ginevra fits in, but I disregarded that... because Peregrine was just ridiculous to try and fit into that... but it wasn’t Peregrine. Ginevra Weasley... no, Ginevra – Molly – Weasley... you...”

For the longest time, Ginny said nothing. She merely stood paralysed.

Then finally, she said weakly: “You play way too much Scrabble.”

He wasn’t done yet. He was frowning so deeply that it was hard to see his eyes. “You... ‘I am Lord Voldemort’. My name – that including Marvolo – which is... you knew about... and I hadn’t told you yet... so how... and Molly – Molly seems much more appropriate... Aiobheann-” (he spoke her ‘middle-name’ with an accent that not even she could pull off) “-that’s Irish... and yes, you have red hair, but you are not Irish... and you... Weasley... so why...”

“Okay, seriously, Tom, stop thinking,” she said desperately, grabbing his shoulders. “You’re going to give yourself an aneurysm.” She took the box from his hands and set it back down on the table, then pushed him towards the living room, sitting him down on the sofa. “We are talking. Now.”

Tom blinked a few times, trying to get himself out of concentrate-hard-and-work-out-irrating-puzzle-that-will-only-annoy-you-until-you-sit-down-frown-and-solve-it mode. "Okay."

She took a deep breath. Right. Where did she start?

"You're right," she told him. "Congratulations. Brownie points for being the smartest in the class. I'm not from Ireland. I'm not home-schooled, and I'm certainly not from London, either. I'm from Devon. More precisely, Ottery St. Catchpole." She stared down at her hands. "But, if we're going to get technical, I'm kind of from the future."

There was no sound from beside her.

"Remember how I turned up, and, though I was supposedly home-schooled, I knew the curriculum perfectly? And... and I never got lost, in all of Hogwarts. Not once. I knew my way around on the first day. And I didn't understand the weird slang everyone used. And then I said strange things that no-one else understood. Irish thing – right. Time era thing, more like. And..." she trailed off. "And when I left..." she swallowed, and turned to look at him, hard. "That wasn't because I wanted to go. I had no choice. Time-travel... it's messed up, to be honest. You get sent back with an objective, and once it's been done, then poof. Back to your own time. That's what happened to me."

He spoke, though he wasn't looking at her. "What was your objective?"

"Er." A hundred excuses whirled through her mind. The truth screamed out at her from the midst of them. Her throat was dry. She said, "To... be happy." She elaborated, sensing that her excuse was terrible. "There was... fighting in my own time." That was true. "It wasn't safe. I was sent back in time so that I would be protected. They forgot about the whole objective thing, though. So as soon as I was happy... I disappeared."

"You came back."

"It was only after I went back home that I realised where I really wanted to be. Who I really wanted to be with," she said softly.

"You left your family behind."

"No..." she stared down at the floor. "That part was true. My family was killed."

"Oh... I'm sorry." Tom reached out for her, curling his arm around her waist and pulling her into his side.

She looked up at him, surprised. "What?" She was confused. "You mean... you don't really... care?"

He shrugged. "What am I going to say? 'Oh dear God, you lied to me about the time-period you were born in; we can't possibly remain together, I demand we get the marriage annulled'?" He kissed the side of her face. "And... well, I suppose everything makes more sense now."

Ginny smiled. "Probably."

"So... you actually are a Weasley?" he verified. "Merlin." He shook his head. "I presume that you changed from that to Peregrine because-" His sentence cut short. His eyes widened.

"What?" she repeated, worried.

He looked at her, incredulity in her eyes. "Weasleys are pure-bloods."

A hot red flush burnt in her cheeks. "Maybe."

He sat back and looked at her, amazed. "You're... a pure-blood."

"Yeah. And are you really so shallow that it matters?"

"Well. No. I just..." He raised his eyebrows, as though still adjusting to this. "It seems strange. You were always so defiant about being Muggle-born. And..." he seemed slightly embarrassed. "I was quite pleased that you were Muggle-born, because it meant that you couldn't possibly dislike me for having low blood status." He smirked

at her. "Now I know that there must be something wonderful about me that draws you past my blood."

She hit his arm. "Silly. I don't care about that sort of crap. My best friend's a- was a – Muggle-born. Every time that someone insulted me, I imagined that they were insulting her, her memory, and it just..." she sighed. "Well, at least I know I'm a better actress than I give myself credit for."

"Certainly, you had me fooled."

"I can't believe that you were more astonished at my real blood status than at the fact that I actually live forty-something years into the future," Ginny tutted, laughing.

He shifted closer to her, looking curiously at her. "I suppose that you weren't born in 1942, then."

"1991," she told him, grinning.

"So you left..."

"2008."

"And you already went to Hogwarts?"

"Proud Gryffindor. Well, I was then. I gag at the thought now."

He seemed to be choking similarly. She giggled at the thought that if anything was going to make him run a mile, it was probably her Gryffindor-isms.

"You sure that you're alright?" she checked.

"Yes... one more question, though."

"Shoot."

Tom hesitated, seeming to be working out how to word it. "Did I... do I... become anything interesting?" he asked, teasing, but a burning

curiosity beneath that. "Owner of Flourish and Blott's? Hogwarts schoolteacher?" He chuckled. "Ruler of the world?"

Ginny laughed nervously with him. "Maybe," she lied. "I don't think so. Sorry."

He didn't seem to care. "Oh, well," he said offhandedly. "Times change." He ducked to kiss her, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

She had imagined that she might tell him one day, but she had never pictured it quite like this... or him taking it quite so well. It was incredible. There was just one problem. Lord Voldemort.

Shut up. She banished these thoughts and pushed her lips back into Tom's. He never had to find out. It was better that way.

xxx

A/N: I know that Harry Potter was actually set like 1997-ish, but still, this is AU, and in my world, Ginny came from 2008. Not 2009. Because it was 2008 when I started this whole shebang. You know it's been exactly a year since I started? Well. A bit more now, because this update is late, late, late! Review, and you get a Dark Lord husband of your choice asking you where you live. d:

OMG. IT'S SO ANNOYING. All of my fics DELETED. And yes, thankfully, this was backed up, but MY OTHER ONE DIED. The Serpent and the Siren, my Evil!Ginny and Dark!Tom went kaput. And is no more. Meeeeeeeeeeeeep.):

xxx

Chapter Twenty-Six: Put Your Money Where Your Mouth Is

"I can't believe that you were more astonished at my real blood status than at the fact that I actually live forty-something years into the future," Ginny tutted, laughing.

He ducked to kiss her, but her thoughts were elsewhere. She had imagined that she might tell him one day, but she had never pictured it quite like this... or him taking it quite so well. It was incredible. There was just one problem. Lord Voldemort. Shut up. She banished these thoughts and pushed her lips back into Tom's. He never had to find out. It was better that way.

xxx

"Happy birthday!" Ginny squealed, hopping up and down. It was actually, she realised, the first of Tom's birthdays that she had been present for. For his eighteenth, she had been back in the future, and his nineteenth had been in the period when they had briefly broken up and pretended that the other didn't exist – a tactic that had spectacularly failed.

Tom's mouth fell slightly open upon seeing their apartment. "Merlin."

"I like paper-chains," she said proudly.

"I can see that."

Literally every surface was covered – drowned, more realistically – in crepe paper. It hung from the ceiling, and was even scattered across the floor along with colourful confetti. There were sparkles mixed in among it all.

Ginny turned back to look at it. She grimaced. "Okay, well, maybe I got a little bit carried away. Too bad. I missed your other two birthdays, so this makes up for it, right?"

"In paper decorations, for one thing, certainly." He still seemed in shock at the level of flimsy paper swans floating on tables and sofas.

“So.” She clapped her hands together. “What do you want first, your presents or your cake?”

“Cake?” Tom asked dubiously.

“Yup. Come on.” She stumbled away through the sea of paper, Tom wading after her. She stopped at the dining table, and pulled a cardboard box away from where it had been serving as a lid. “Tada!” she cried with a flourish.

“...I’m going to hazard a guess and presume that it’s a cake, then.”

“Correct.”

“Is it actually a cake, though?” He prodded it with his finger.

“Probably not. If you tilt your head to the left and squint a bit, it looks more like a cake.”

He did so.

“No, no, your other left.”

He frowned. “That’s my right.”

“Whatever. My left.”

“That’s your right, as well.”

“Whatever.” She glanced down at her ‘cake’. “...Okay, I think we’re done looking at it. It can go in the bin now. Unless you want food poisoning, that is.”

“I’m alright, thank you.”

Tom watched her as she picked up the attempt at a cake and carried it through to the kitchen. She left it clumsily on the counter and then returned, dusting her hands on her skirt.

“Present?” she tried, holding out the package next to where the cake had sat. It was quite large, lumpy, and wrapped in glittery orange paper, with a big neon pink bow on the top.

As though trying to guess what was inside the wrapping paper, Tom twisted it in his hands. “Is it another beaver?” he asked wryly, smirking.

She set her hands on her hips. “You say that as though you didn’t like the first one.” She gestured impatiently at the gift. “Go on, open it! Open! Now!”

“Whose birthday is this?” Tom murmured, his lips flickering with a smile as he neatly shelled the orange paper away (Ginny immediately proceeded to put the clashing pink bow in her hair, the Spellotape clinging to her hair in a manner that she realised was probably going to be painful later when she tried to take it out).

Unwrapped, he shook out a folded jumper in a soft dark grey colour. His hands moved to marvel at the wool material. “Thank you,” he said, pleased, and ducked to kiss her.

“Put it on!” she exclaimed. “I wanna see what it looks like.” She took it from him so that he could pull off the jumper he was already wearing, even though it was April and perfectly warm enough in the apartment to not need one. Before he had even put the first jumper on the dining room table, shoving aside some paper-chains to make space for it, Ginny had stood on tiptoe, stretching up as far as she could, to push the jumper over her husband’s head.

“Calm down!” he said, his voice muffled and twisted from inside the wool, but he gave up trying to sort himself out and instead allowed her to play with his limbs, bending them at odd angles to get them into the sleeves. When she was finally finished, he said firmly, “You are not dressing the baby.”

“Fair enough.” Her eyes raked over him. The jumper fit, perhaps more closely to his lean body than he would have preferred, but it looked good. She ran her fingers lightly over the material, smoothing it

across his skin, and smiled up at him. "It's good!"

He nodded. There was a slightly distracted look in his eyes, as though he wasn't completely paying attention.

"Okay, birthday boy," she said teasingly, grinning. "Anything you want?" She winked. "Your wish is my command."

"Hm?" He blinked at her.

"I said, is there anything you want?" she repeated, more slowly.

"...Not really."

She eyed him. "You have that look on your face."

"What look?"

"The look you get when you're having a conversation with yourself in your head and you're saying, don't say it don't say it. Now say whatever you want to say."

Tom swallowed, his lips twisting sheepishly. "Well." His eyes flashed quickly to where she hadn't realised that her hand was still resting, low on his abdomen. She noticed then that he was breathing somewhat irregularly.

"Ah." She smirked at him. "You had enough of that, and this," (she patted her belly) "is what came of it."

So little that it was barely noticeable, Tom's face fell. Ginny laughed, and then stood on tiptoe to give him her lips. After all, it was his birthday.

xxx

Ginny curled up on Grace's bed like a cat, just enjoying the general chatter. She missed her best friend when she was away at university, and it was nice just to be stupid and girly again. All the supernatural

problems and the pregnant stuff and the Bernard trying to kill her... being mature and sensible got boring after a while.

Grace had taken time off university to go to Philippa's funeral, and had taken an extra week. Today was the last day of her being home, and then she would return to school with Luke.

"So, anyway, what was up with Tom at the chapel?" Grace asked. Neither of them liked saying the word 'funeral' out loud. "Seriously, his face was like he wanted to actually rip Terby into small pieces or something."

"Er." Ginny twisted a strand of red hair around her finger. "Tom... doesn't like Bernard."

The answer to this was a disbelieving snort. "Oh, really? I couldn't tell. What, did Terby steal his role as Best-Looking Slytherin?" She giggled, but then her mouth fell open with realisation. "Ohmigod! Didn't you snog Terby last year?"

The redhead sighed. "Yeah. By accident. He's still annoyed about that, I guess."

"Right, because that's a decent enough reason to shield you like he was ready to throw himself in front of the Killing Curse or something." Grace rolled her eyes. "Seriously, bub, you need to get him some medication."

"I'll keep that in mind," Ginny said sardonically. She looked at her watch, and swiftly moved the conversation to safer waters. "Where's Luke?"

"Oh, he's talking to Jake. You know. Man stuff. Or something like that." She shrugged. "It's a guy thing. How would I know?"

"Speaking of guys, when is Alden coming?"

"In ten minutes."

"So, then, he should be at the door about now, then," Ginny prompted.

“Probably.”

They moved downstairs, and just as they descended the last flight of stairs in Grace’s ridiculously big Hertfordshire mansion, the doorbell rang. They ran the last few fifty metres of winding corridors, staggering over up-turned carpet edges and Leah’s toys strewn across the floor, and then crashed into the front door, nearly falling out it as they pulled it open.

“Hi, Alden!” they chorused – only to find themselves looking at a very bewildered Muggle milkman. They sobered up instantly, standing up straight and biting back their giggles. “How do you do, sir?” Ginny asked, curtsying low with a stifled snort.

It was then that they noticed Alden coming up the path behind the milkman, sporting an amused look on his face.

“Alden!” they yelled, disregarding the milkman completely.

“Oh dear, how much sugar have you two had?” he asked wearily, though he was grinning at the two of them as he approached, side-stepping the fearful milkman.

Ginny and Grace glanced at each other. “Er.”

He shook his head at them, tutting, and slipped past them into the house, shaking his arms free of his coat. He cast a friendly look at Luke, which the ginger male returned – a warm response which slid free of his face as Grace happily threw her arms around Alden.

Grace let go of Alden and stood between him and Luke, looking around at all of them. “So what do you guys want to do?” she asked excitedly, though Ginny was the only one really paying attention, as Alden and Luke were busy glowering at each other.

“I’m alright for whatever you want,” said Luke, linking his arm through Grace’s.

“We could play Musical Chairs!” Ginny exclaimed, sensing testosterone boiling in the room. “Come on, Alden, let’s find some chairs.” She dragged him away. Poor Luke. He really needed a chance.

They returned with various stools and chairs, and set them up in a rather lopsided circle.

“You know, we could try acting older than seven, for once,” Alden said dryly, observing their work as Grace called down Jacob, his two friends from his job at the Ministry, and Leah.

“...Nah.”

Ginny put on Kids In Glass Cauldrons, nominating herself as the music person, as she suspected that being sat on and squashed in the rush for a chair would not be particularly good for the baby’s well-being.

‘Put your money where your mouth is, put your money where your mouth is. Pretty boy who’s keeping score, got it all and you want more.’

Luke, Alden, Jacob, Grace, Jacob’s two friends and Leah all began running around in a crazy circle, sprinting needlessly fast as they waited for the music to stop.

‘You are so disgusting, you’re my hero. You look just like trouble-‘

“STOP!” Ginny yelled, and there was a roar of noise as everyone scrambled for a chair. It ended with Leah being sent away in tears, Mrs. Hartwin coming to take the little girl away. Ginny removed another chair from the circle, and announced, “Last round saw the removal of one players in tears and with a hurt pinkie finger. Be careful, it’s dangerous! Are you ready for round two of... EXTREME MUSICAL CHAIRS?”

“YEAH!” they all shouted, and Ginny hit the button on the tape-player.

‘Doo-de-doo, doo-doo-doo, you know, where you go, doo-de-doo, doo-doo-’

“And... SCRAMBLE!”

Everyone threw themselves at a chair, clinging desperately. One of Jacob’s friends was evicted. Grace giggled maniacally, as she had removed him forcibly from his chair and usurped his position.

“Round three!” Ginny shouted.

‘-We take three steps forward and three steps back, she said I don’t like the way you’re dressing-’

They all jumped up and began running around. Despite the immaturity of the party game, the excitement was infectious, and Ginny found herself bouncing up and down, clapping and cheering – it was a while before she realised that she was supposed to stop the record.

“STOP!” she said, whacking the button, cutting off sharply a shout of ‘GIMME WHAT I WANT’ from the record player.

The end result of five grown adults throwing themselves at various hard objects was that Jacob clung, gasping, to a chair, sporting a black eye, and that Grace, shrieking as she realised that she was going to be tossed out, leapt onto Alden’s lap, trying to steal his seat.

In less than three seconds, Luke’s face turned scarlet. He stood swiftly, his jaw tightening. “It’s fine, Grace, love, you can have my chair,” he snapped. He was looking at her, though; his eyes were fixed, burning, on Alden.

“I’m alright,” Grace said, perfectly cheerful about losing. “You won fair and square.” She stretched up to kiss Luke. “You play with Alden, Jake and what’s-his-face.”

“No, sorry, Grace, but I think I’m going to call it quits,” grumbled Jacob, still nursing his eye, and he staggered away, calling his friends after him. Though Grace was oblivious, Ginny noticed that he growled

under his breath as he left – to Luke, or to Alden, or perhaps to both of them, “Stay away from my sister.”

Now there was only Luke and Alden left in the game, glaring at each other.

Ginny had a very bad feeling about this.

“Aw, poor little Jake,” Grace said, after her brother had left. “I’m not sure which hurts more, his face or his ego.” She grimaced. “I’m going to check he’s okay, actually. Don’t worry, you can keep playing.”

Ginny hit the button on the tape-player, and a chorus began loudly and enthusiastically, but neither Alden nor Luke seemed at all interested in playing. As soon as she had left the room, a fight ensued. And Ginny was shocked to see that it was Alden who punched Luke in the face.

“Crap, what are you doing?” she yelled, running forwards to intervene as Luke retaliated. It was because of her ‘helpful’ intervention that the curled fist caught her on the side of the head instead. “Oh!” she cried, surprised, and then fell sideways; Alden lunged and caught her just in time.

“Are you alright?” they both asked, flushing with embarrassment.

“Careful!” she exclaimed, standing up. “Pregnant woman here! I did not ask to be part of your weird little love triangle, okay?” She sighed. “Just calm down. Breathe! In – out. Get it?” She pushed a hand backwards through her hair. “Merlin.”

“Jake’s fine, don’t worry-” Grace stopped still in the doorway, blinking. “What’s happening?”

“Nothing!” Ginny said brightly, though Luke’s lip was bleeding, and both males were scowling. “Everything is just dandy.”

xxx

“Well, thanks for coming over,” Grace said, hugging Alden as she said goodbye to him. “It was really fun. Write to me at uni, alright? I still exist, even if I’m a hundred miles away.”

“You’ll still have me,” said Luke.

She looked at him appraisingly. “I didn’t say that I wouldn’t,” she replied, confused.

“Well, have fun. Take care of yourself, right?” Alden said warningly.

“I will.” She frowned. “I always do. I come back in one piece, don’t I? Ignoring cuts, bruises and grazes, of course.”

“Yeah, but...” Dragging in a breath, as though acting on a whim, Alden blurted out, “Grace, I love you and I want you to choose me instead of Luke.”

Ginny’s mouth fell open, eyes opening widening. Luke turned purple and a vein pulsed dangerously in his temple. Grace looked as though she was having trouble remaining conscious. “What?” she said faintly.

Alden didn’t repeat himself; he just leant across the threshold and crushed Grace’s lips fiercely under his own.

“Don’t touch her,” Luke snarled, shoving Alden backwards.

“Oh my God, Luke!” Grace cried, horrified at the brutality her boyfriend was spontaneously showing.

And Alden threw himself forwards with a punch again. Luke staggered back, a crunch being heard from his jaw, but then he reacted, his own fists flying out, cracking Alden’s head against the door-frame. The Slytherin lashed out, but Luke was faster, and smashed his face again, again-

“WHAT DID I TELL YOU?” Jacob was suddenly roaring, dragging them apart as easily as if they were made of cloth, holding them away from each other. As soon as they were out of each other’s reach, they slumped, resigned. Jacob let his arms fall back down to his sides and

stepped back. "If you break her heart, I will personally break your face. The word pain will be given a whole new meaning in your dictionary. Is that understood?"

"I love you, Grace," Alden tried again, disregarding her brother completely.

"No," she yelled, unable to take anymore, and she slammed the door in his face, leaving him outside.

Luke huffed, straightening his shirt. "I can not believe his nerve," he muttered.

"Don't you start!" Grace screamed at him, her voice shattering, and she ran, disappearing up the stairs. The rattle of a door being thrown shut reverberated through the whole house.

Luke turned to stare at Ginny, who had been standing, shocked into silence, for the whole ordeal. "She loves him, doesn't she?" he said, his voice colourless. He didn't even let Ginny answer; just turned on his heel and stalked away.

Ginny pressed her back against the wall and heaved a heavy sigh, giving Jacob a weary, whatever-are-we-going-to-do-now look. If this was everything that Grace had ever dreamed of, then why was it turning out so badly? She laid her head back, looking hopelessly up at the ceiling. It wasn't supposed to be easy, but it wasn't supposed to be this hard.

xxx

A/N: Aw. For so long, I've been waiting to set up a Luke-VS-Alden scene where they both declare their love for her and then Jacob has to break up a fight and then Grace runs away crying. EPIC. Well, please review. Everyone knows that reviews are brain food.

Xxx

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Ain't Life A Bitch

So little that it was barely noticeable, Tom's face fell. Ginny laughed, and then stood on tiptoe to give him her lips. After all, it was his birthday.

"Yeah, but..." Dragging in a breath, as though acting on a whim, Alden blurted out, "Grace, I love you and I want you to choose me instead of Luke."

Luke turned to stare at Ginny, who had been standing, shocked into silence, for the whole ordeal. "She loves him, doesn't she?" he said, his voice colourless. He didn't even let Ginny answer; just turned on his heel and stalked away. Ginny pressed her back against the wall and heaved a heavy sigh, giving Jacob a weary, whatever-are-we-going-to-do-now look. If this was everything that Grace had ever dreamed of, then why was it turning out so badly? She laid her head back, looking hopelessly up at the ceiling. It wasn't supposed to be easy, but it wasn't supposed to be this hard.

xxx

It was with some trepidation that Ginny headed up to Edward Storne's office for the second time. She wasn't sure what he wanted. She hoped that it was something to do with her article on the Muggle Genocides, which, as far as she could tell, had been a success. She didn't think she was being fired... no-one had seen her knock over that Greek vase, and it had been an accident, anyway. And Will Gallantree said that the coffee stains were barely noticeable on the floor of the hallway.

She tripped over the top few steps, and therefore landed on her face in the reception, but quickly got to her feet again, blushing. She avoided the eyes of Storne's receptionist, who was eyeing her with something like a mixture of disdain and pity. She knocked meekly on the door of her employer's office, and waited for a moment before 'Enter' rang out from within, like something from a bad mafia movie. She pushed open the door and hovered anxiously.

“Hello, Miss Peregrine,” he said, his tone friendly. He glanced up at her with a smile. “Take a seat.”

Ginny moved to the seat in front of his massive desk and sat carefully on the edge. “Hi, sir.” She cleared her throat. “Is there something you wanted?”

“Yes, there is.” He observed her while twisting a few curls of his grey hair around his fingers. “You know, I’ve been considering your article for Muggle Genocide day and all of that, and... well, I’ve yet to ask Angeline if she’s willing to take you under her wing-”

The redhead fought back a grimace. Like that was ever going to happen. Maybe Storne had somehow missed the glowers that his daughter forever shot at her.

“-but I’m willing to give you a probation period as a writer.”

There was a rush in Ginny’s blood – another promotion! – but there was confusion more prominently in her head. “You mean... a journalist?” she asked.

“No, no.” He shook his head, chuckling. She felt like a small child who had been denied by the big boys. “No, I think you’re a bit young for that.” Now that was really patronising. “You would simply be taking interviews that others have made and transforming them into written articles. Of course, this is just a test-period, to see how you get on.” He pulled some papers towards him and looked over them; already distracted by the next important task. “Would you be willing to try that?”

“Oh, yes, of course, sir,” Ginny said, tripping over her words in her excitement. Finally, she was something important! Not just the paper girl, not just the refreshments girl, not just the scheduler of interviews – a writer! It was hardly a journalist, but it was a start. If she could just use this to prove to him that her age didn’t matter towards anything, then she’d be all set! “Is that all?”

“Hm? Yes, yes.”

She bounced out her seat and hurried to the door, almost bouncing down the stairs to return to her own floor. She couldn't believe it! There was still a flush in her cheeks, a heat in her face at her luck and happiness.

She laid the back of her hand against her cheek. It was hot enough to fry an egg on. She couldn't wait to tell Beth and Louise and Tom and Grace and Alden and Luke and everyone! She took a deep breath to calm herself, and then, deciding on getting a quick beverage to steady her nerves, she headed into the cloak cupboard, where there was a small water dispenser. Perhaps some water would cool her down-

Eyes wide, Ginny froze, dropping the plastic cup she'd just picked up.

In the far corner of the cupboard was none other than Louise. But she wasn't alone. And she certainly didn't look so shy anymore.

Will Gallantree had her pinned in the corner, one of his hands flat on the wall on next to the side of her head, the other tangled in her soft blonde hair; Louise wrapped her arms tightly around Will's neck. Then her blue eyes fluttered open, and slowly focused on Ginny.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, flushing absolutely scarlet. She let go of Will, standing up properly, and straightened her glasses and her skirt. "Ginny," she said, embarrassedly. Will grinned at the redhead sheepishly, buttoning his shirt.

"I..." said Ginny slowly, backing away, "didn't... see... anything..." She shut the door behind her.

She returned to her work cubicle to celebrate the good news with Beth – both that she'd been given a promotion, and that Will and Louise had got together, if more extravagantly than necessary. Her eyes still burned. She now knew how Alden had felt when he had burst in on her and Tom on New Year's Eve at Grace's house. She shuddered.

"Hey, what's with you?" Beth asked casually, draping herself over a chair with a mug of coffee. "You look dead on your feet."

"Louise and Will are together," she said stiffly, up-ending the bin and dropping heavily onto it.

Beth blinked, not seeming to understand. "Huh?" She frowned, trying to piece together Ginny's tone and her words and her actions. None of it seemed to fit. She seemed to disregard the anomalies, and then a grin broke out on her face. "Seriously? How do you know?"

She shook her head, covering her eyes with her hand. "Don't go in the cloak cupboard."

"Whoa." Beth whistled. "Oh, Merlin. How much did you see?"

"Everything," she groaned.

Beth cackled with laughter, shaking her head. One thing that was certain about Beth was that she was loyal, dependable, and had a good heart, but she had a sharp-tongue, she could be unkind, and she showed no sympathy. Ginny would have put money on her having been in Slytherin at Hogwarts.

"Louise said that she was getting a cup of tea, anyway." Beth tutted, irritated. "Trust her to ditch me for a man." She scowled. "Men are useless," she muttered, crossing her arms over her chest.

"No, they're not," Ginny tried to persuade. "Admittedly, they're not exactly useful, but-"

"Never mind," said Beth. "It doesn't matter. Anyway, what did ole' Storney want with you?"

Ginny should have guessed that her friend would clam up as soon as she tried to get anything out of her. Another of Beth's traits was being secretive, and it seemed that she was especially touchy about past relationships. For the bits and pieces that she had accidentally let slip, Beth had only had one proper boyfriend, and it hadn't ended beautifully. As far as Ginny could tell, the older woman didn't date at all anymore... she just slept around a lot.

“Oh yeah!” she clapped her hands together, standing up from where she was sitting on the bin and bouncing. “I got a promotion!” She beamed.

“Well done, then.” Beth smirked. “You seem to be climbing up the business ladder quite quickly.” She nudged Ginny with her elbow. “Guess who’s sleeping with the boss?”

“You, if anyone,” Ginny retorted.

Beth shrugged. “True.” She giggled evilly.

xxx

Her shoulders slumped, dragging her feet, Ginny trailed home in the rain. She had chosen to walk instead of Apparate, as it was raining, and she felt like spending a while moping. She had yesterday sent in her first article for her attempt at being a writer, and had it quite spectacularly rejected by Angeline. That would have been tolerable, as Angeline had been hit with the sour-stick when she was a toddler, but daddy’s girl gave it to her father, and even Edward Storne, upon looking over it, had announced in front of everyone that it was “quite disappointing, really, Miss Peregrine”.

Fun, fun, fun.

There went her hopes of being a journalist down the drain. Whoosh. Pull the plug, flush the toilet. All gone now.

She kicked a puddle, water spraying up her leg. Typical London. Wet and dreary and miserable. A depressed city full of depressed people. No wonder everyone committed suicide.

Ginny shoved open the door to the Redrick Apartment block and made her way up the stairs, her shoes squeaking loudly, slopping wetly across the floor tiles. She knew that she looked the picture of a drowned rat, and she ignored the alarmed looks that the ground floor staff were giving her. She never really spoke to them anyway – she never usually came down this way.

Her apartment was warm, at least, so she didn't feel as though she was going to catch hypothermia on top of everything else. She wrung out her hair in the kitchen sink, and for a moment she thought that the rainwater she released from her hair would be stained red, as though her hair colour, her very essence, was seeping down the drain with everything else.

Her coat squealed noisily with complaint as she removed it, and her hat was no more than a flat squash of sodden wool. She dumped them in the cupboard, and then, kicking off her shoes with a spray of water, she got herself a glass of orange juice.

No longer thirsty, she moved across to the windowsill to gather the daily post. The Prophet was nothing interesting – the headlines screamed nothing special at her – and to be honest, she wasn't bothered with anything to do with the stupid bloomin' Daily Prophet. The only other post were two letters.

The first was from Alden, written in a neat, tidy cursive.

Ginny,

It's incredible; you'll never believe it. Dominic's recovering! His brain and spine are intact, and he's showing signs of life. The doctors think that there's a chance of him waking up – and, because his central nervous system wasn't damaged, they think that he might be perfectly fine! There's even a possibility that he won't need a wheelchair, though I think that's quite slim. I'll keep you informed on what's happening.

-Alden

PS. Have you heard from Grace? I don't think my letter's have been getting through to her.

Ginny heaved a sigh. Even amongst the absolutely wonderful news that Dominic Philips was getting better, there was still all this crappy crap. Even Alden couldn't be happy about Dom, because there was a black and vaguely Grace-shaped cloud hovering over him; a cloud with no silver lining.

She tossed the letter onto the table, where she could write a reply later. She flipped over the next letter and opened it. It was, ironically, from Grace.

Ginny,

I'm back at university. The journey was awkward, and really quiet, but it's easier now. We have loads of work to do, plus we have to catch up on all the stuff we missed for the last two weeks. I don't have much free time, so the only times that I ever really see Luke are at lunch-breaks and when he walks me across campus to lesson. He seems fine. He's really pleased with himself, if anything. I reckon he thinks that he's winning this whole argument because Alden isn't here. ...I really don't know what to think anymore. He's been sending me letters, but I haven't even opened any. I've got about four now – tucked under my bed, so Luke doesn't find them. I don't want to know what they say. I don't think I can take it all over again.

One of the girls in my apartment – you know, the mean one, Molly – blatantly fancies Luke, and she keeps hitting on him and stuff, like bending over in front of him when she's wearing a skirt. I don't like it, 'cause he's mine and everything, but I really can't be bothered to do anything. He just seems to like the attention. Girls have always been all over him. It's just like he's a honey-pot or something. I dunno. Life's a bitch, and then you die.

Well, I'll talk to you later, but-gottagoLuke'shere-

LoveGracexxx

Ginny threw that onto the table as well. She propped her elbows on the window-sill, resting her chin on her hand and staring gloomily out into the storm. If anything that Grace had said in her letter was completely and unbelievably true, then it was this:

Ain't life a bitch.

xxx

A/N: Yeah, sorry that this was a bit late. I posted up a Dramione one-shot (Anti Angel) and the first two chapters of the Tom Marvolo Riddle story (Dear Diary) that I'm working on, to make up for it. It's just that I've been noticing a few plot-holes from here on, so I was fixing up the plot. I will admit shamelessly that I have stolen ideas from Snow Patrol lyrics, Britney Spears lyrics, and Gossip Girl. It fits in so much more nicely. Yeah, I'm getting really obsessed with Gossip Girl. I love Dan and Serena. They're so cute.

SNOW DAY! I had a day off school today because of snow that came from Russia. Yay me. I hope it keeps up. d: Please review, you know I love you all so much for staying with me throughout this. REVIEW.

Xxx

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Click Click Bang

Ginny heaved a sigh. Even amongst the absolutely wonderful news that Dominic Philips was getting better, there was still all this crappy crap. Even Alden couldn't be happy about Dom, because there was a black and vaguely Grace-shaped cloud hovering over him; a cloud with no silver lining. She propped her elbows on the window-sill, resting her chin on her hand and staring gloomily out into the storm. If anything that Grace had said in her letter was completely and unbelievably true, then it was this: Ain't life a bitch.

xxx

Ginny stumbled slightly as she Apparated with Tom in front of the door to 21-5D, crashing into his chest. "Oops," she said, giggling.

"Are you alright?" he asked, glancing down at her.

"Yeah, I'm fine." She sighed, resting her head on his arm as he unlocked the door. "Thanks for dinner." They had gone out to a restaurant to eat, to celebrate Ginny's promotion. It had taken a while to book a reservation, but it had been well worth it.

"Thank you for getting a promotion," he pointed out. The key clicked noisily in the door.

"Ah, it was easy," she teased, grinning as she followed him into the apartment. "I'm just fabulous. Born brilliant at everything."

"Perhaps," he acknowledged, humouring her. She could see the smirk playing across his lips in the dim light from the hallway, and then it disappeared, because he ducked to kiss her.

Ginny smiled against his mouth, standing on tiptoe to press her lips more insistently against his, resting her small hands on his shoulders. She reached for the door and pushed it to close it over. They were both plunged into darkness, standing together in the hallway, intertwined-

Someone cleared their throat.

They jumped apart, alarmed. Ginny groped behind her for the light-switch, missing it a few times in her confusion before she hit it.

The pale light that filled the apartment fell softly on Bernard, sitting cross-legged on the living room floor, quite casual. There was a pleasant smile on his handsome face.

Something akin to an animal snarl ripped from Tom as he stormed forwards, but Ginny rushed after him, abandoning her surprised post at the light-switch; she grabbed him, setting a hand on his chest and pushing him back. "Calm down," she said softly. She looked up at him imploringly, and then turned back to Bernard, walking to her himself. "Why are you in my house?" she said, keeping her tone level.

"I missed you," he whispered, his green eyes wide, beseeching.

Ginny could almost physically hear the scream of Tom's burning fury. She narrowed her eyes at Bernard, wanting the truth.

"Fine, fine." Bernard stretched lazily, yawning, for all appearances totally unbothered. "I wanted to know if you're interested in playing a little game."

"We don't want any of your stupid diversions," Tom snapped, following his wife to stand beside her.

Bernard disregarded this completely, and merely turned his sharp green gaze on Ginny, leaning back on his hands.

"What game?" she said warily.

He drummed his fingers idly on the floorboards. "Well, I can't tell you that until you agree to play, silly," he scoffed. "Don't worry, it's a perfectly fair game, and it's possible for me to lose." He flashed a dazzling smile. "I'm not going to cheat."

Ginny shook her head, stepping back into Tom's side. "I don't want to play."

He sighed as though disappointed. "I'm afraid you don't really have a choice," he said, his voice mockingly sympathetic. "See, I really want to play this game... and I'm quite used to getting what I want." He bared his teeth in a smile that was far from reassuring. "So here's the deal." He sat up properly, his tone more serious now but his eyes still laughing at them. "You can play the game, and we'll all get on quite happily. Or..." he trailed off menacingly, "you can refuse to play the game, and I'll go to the Ministry, and I might accidentally let slip who really killed Philippa Decrow."

The redhead's hazel eyes narrowed fatally. "You wouldn't dare," she hissed, leaning forwards for the fight, almost like a cat, "because then we'd tell them who killed... Scott." She forced out his name; it was an old wound. The shakiness of her voice on that final word disarmed the venom in her voice.

Bernard just laughed at her. "What, and you think they'll believe you?" he asked sarcastically. "Imperiused? Then framed? Oh dear, he seems to be quite the target, doesn't he? And trust me, this time, it'll be the Dementor's Kiss." He blew a scornful kiss at them.

Tom stepped forwards slightly. "Say we play your game," he growled. "What's the catch?"

"There is no catch," said the younger male.

"Fine." Ginny glanced across at Tom for verification. His face was stone. "We'll play."

Bernard's hand moved behind his back, and he appeared to be fiddling with something behind him. "If I lose, then you can safely say that I will never bother you again," he told them. His lips were twisted, as though he was laughing at some private joke.

"And if we lose?"

"Then you lose." Bernard winked, standing up and moving towards the dining table. "Simple."

They followed him to the table and sat down. Ginny and Tom were at one end, close together; Bernard sat at the other end. Ginny wanted to sit on Tom's lap and hold onto him for comfort, but she knew that would be a sign of weakness to Bernard.

"Okay, then," he said, and he drew from behind his back something small and dark. Ginny's eyes widened as she focused on what it was - a gun. A revolver. He smiled devilishly as he slipped a single bullet into it, clicked the cylinder shut and spun it, once, twice, three times. "Are you familiar with Russian roulette?"

"No," Tom snarled – not because he wasn't familiar with the game, but because he was all too familiar with it – and grabbed Ginny, pulling her into him, turning his body in his chair to hide her.

"Fine." Bernard didn't seem bothered at all by this reaction. He stood. "I'll see you in court, I suppose."

Ginny stared at him. She knew why he was doing this. There were six rounds in a revolver. There were three of them. The probability was far higher of it hitting her or Tom than it was Bernard. But imagine the possibility... no more worries of Bernard. It was brutal, she knew that, but she'd been in the War. She'd seen worse.

She wrenched away from Tom and leaned across the table. "Give it here," she said furiously, snatching it up. Tom didn't even have time to say anything; he just watched as she pointed the barrel at her head and-

Click.

An empty round.

It was only when Tom released a rough, jagged breath that she realised she was trembling. How close she'd come to exposing her skull, her brain... how close she'd come to death.

"You stupid, stupid-" Tom snarled, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her. He didn't finish his sentence; he just dragged her into his chest and held her tight.

A moment later: “Your turn,” Bernard said, perfectly calm. Ginny knew that he was close to suicidal anyway. It didn’t matter to him whether he lived or died. After his revenge on Tom and Ginny was done, he was going to end his life. What did it matter if it was a little earlier, a little messier, than he had planned?

The tiniest, broken, “no” came involuntarily from Ginny as her husband lifted the revolver to his own head. She saw him squeeze the trigger in slow-motion, and flinched sideways, closing her eyes tightly. She didn’t want to see-

Click.

She buried her face in his neck, hugging him tightly. His jaw was tight, the muscles in his throat taut with tension as he slid the weapon across the dining table back to Bernard.

Click. Bernard didn’t even wince at the sound of the gun attempting to fire. He was quite cheerful as he passed it back. “Your turn again.”

All three of them knew that the stakes were quite higher now. The probability of the revolver firing had risen dramatically. There weren’t many rounds left. Ginny gritted her teeth and reached for the gun. She directed the barrel towards her temple-

Then, all of a sudden, Tom’s hand flew out, as though on the spur of moment, and jarred the gun, knocking it sideways so that it was pointing past Ginny’s head.

BANG.

Ginny froze, her shoulders tensing. It had missed her by inches – so closely that she could feel burnt hair – and only because Tom had intervened. She didn’t move; she was still in shock. Even Tom seemed to have not really thought that it would have been that very round. His mouth was an ‘o’ of disbelief. Then, slowly, he turned on Bernard.

“You would have killed her,” he said, stunned.

Bernard shrugged lightly. "I would have killed any of all three us." He fixed a steely gaze on Tom. "Besides, if I had wanted to play a game with no chance of you two dying, then I would have brought Wizard's chess, wouldn't I?"

"YOU WOULD HAVE KILLED HER," Tom roared, so loudly and so unexpectedly that Ginny nearly fell out of her chair; he lunged forwards, and he landed three solid, bloody punches to Bernard's face before the younger male toppled to the ground, landing flat on his back.

"Tom, stop it!" she cried, standing, horrified.

And then her husband reached for the revolver.

Eyes wide, she saw immediately what he was going to do. "No!" she screamed as Tom pointed it at where Bernard was lying, bleeding, defenceless, unprotected, without any chance, on the floor-

Click.

There was a terrible silence where they all just remained still – Bernard paralysed on the floor, Ginny staring in horror at her husband, Tom still pointing the revolver down at Bernard, his chest heaving with anger and exertion.

"You know," Bernard then said, quite shakily, though he seemed to be slowly recovering his casual arrogance, "there was only ever one bullet, and that's presently buried in your bedroom wall."

Ginny ignored this. She just stared at Tom. "You... you would have shot him dead," she whispered.

"He nearly killed you," he said angrily.

"I nearly killed myself, thank you very much," she retorted, scarcely able to believe the turn of events.

“Why are you defending him?” Tom shouted, throwing the gun down on the floor. It bounced once, next to Bernard, and then clattered to a standstill on the wooden floor.

“Because you tried to shoot him!” Ginny shrieked. She could feel the beginnings of hysteria coming on. “And that makes you no better than he is!”

She realised instantly that she’d struck a nerve, what with his... problem. His hands tightly clenched into fists, he stormed back to her, towering over her, leaning right down in her face, his eyes flashing darkly. “I,” he ground out furiously from between his teeth, his face mere millimetres from hers, “am not like him.”

Ginny was going to say something in reply when she realised that something was wrong. The darkness flaring in his eyes was not just rage. Something was very wrong. He was breathing too quickly, too roughly, his hands shaking too much for normal anger.

“Tom,” she said urgently, worried. “Tom, stay with me. Okay? Can you still hear me? Look, I’m here, stay here.” She stretched up to kiss him, pressing her lips against his mouth, his cheeks, his jaw, beneath his eyes. She curled her hands around his face, stroking his hair back from his forehead. “Listen to me, Tom, it’s okay. Yeah? It’s alright.” She kissed him again, staring into his eyes. He’d mentioned once what effect her eyes had on him; hopefully it would work now. “Can you still hear me? It’s okay...”

He dragged in a deep, shuddering breath, squeezing his eyes closed. She could see his jaw tighten with fierce pain, his shoulders squaring off. “No,” he groaned. She thought she saw blood between his fingers, digging his nails in so deep to his palm that they cut his skin.

“It’s alright, it’s alright,” she murmured, trying to maintain a low, soothing rhythm and tone to her voice to comfort him. “I’m here, it’s okay now. I’m fine, I didn’t get hurt, and neither did you, and it’s all absolutely fine and I love you.”

It would have been easier if he was shorter, but then again, she couldn’t have everything.

"There we go, calm down," she said gently into his ear, kissing his face. "I love you, I love you... stay with me. Breathe."

He took in another mighty breath at this last instruction, nodding to himself, eyes still tightly closed. He was muttering to himself, something that sounded like, "she loves me" over and over again. She couldn't be sure.

Then, slowly, the darkness fading, he opened his eyes, still shaking slightly. He looked down into her eyes for a second, his laboured breathing fanning coolly across her face; then his gaze flickered past her.

Remembering Bernard, Ginny let go of Tom's face and turned to face the other man. He was smirking, almost in an I-should-have-known, mocking, sardonic way.

"Of course," he said softly, shaking his head. "No what matter you pretend, you were never going to change, were you?" He seemed to be speaking only to Tom now.

"What?" Both of them looked and felt confused.

"You were always going to become that person," Bernard continued, and his eyes flashed across to Ginny, smug.

Abruptly, she understood completely.

Lord Voldemort.

"Bernard," she whispered, her eyes pleading with him. She didn't want Tom to find out... "Bernard, no."

"Oh, but what's this?" Bernard looked absolutely ecstatic at the power he now had over the situation. Again, he was ignoring Ginny, and talking to just Tom. "She didn't tell you?"

"Bernard-"

“Didn’t tell me what?” Tom looked over at her, frowning, puzzled.

Bernard grinned, enjoying this very much. He strolled casually over towards the two of them. “Now, Ginny would never deliberately lie to you, so I’m going to presume she forgot to tell you what you became.”

Tom looked still bewildered, but there was a deep curiosity beneath that. “I became something?”

“Please,” Ginny said, her throat tight. “Don’t.”

“Oh, yes, Riddle. You certainly did.” Bernard circled Tom slowly, almost like a shark. “See, where she comes from, when Tom Marvolo Riddle is mentioned, people don’t think, Flourish and Blott’s employee... Head Boy, 1958 to 1959... Ginevra Peregrine’s husband...” He shook his head chidingly. “No, they think more along the lines of Dark Lord.”

Ginny’s blood ran ice cold through her veins and arteries. She hadn’t wanted this, not at all.

Tom stared. “What?”

“The most evil Dark Lord the Wizarding World has ever seen, more specifically.” Bernard was playing with his food. “The very epitome of evil, according to some people. ...The one who killed all of her family and friends in front of her.” Bernard looked over pointedly at Ginny.

Still confused, Tom followed Bernard’s gaze. “I don’t believe you,” he said uncertainly.

“Why not?” Bernard asked smugly. “Because it makes sense?”

“Bernard, leave it,” Ginny hissed.

“He has a right to know,” he said calmly. He turned his back on her and looked at Tom again. He began to explain. “In a world where you never met Freckles here, never fell in love, never... ‘changed’, ideally – well, you went a little crazy to be honest. It was actually your

demonic friend, if we're going to get technical, but who needs technicalities?"

"I... I was bad?" Tom sounded like a small child struggling to comprehend long division. It broke Ginny's heart.

"As bad as it gets," Bernard said cheerfully.

Tom turned to Ginny now, his eyes raw with emotion. "I killed your family." It wasn't a question.

"No," she shook her head desperately. "No, you didn't."

"Yes, you did," whispered Bernard.

"No!" Ginny covered her mouth with her hand, tears springing to her eyes. "It wasn't you!"

"I killed your family," he repeated blankly. His hand moved unconsciously to his stomach, curling tightly around his abdomen, as though he felt sick. "I..."

"And her friends," said Bernard. Tom turned his dead, empty eyes on him. "And the boy she loved."

Tom's eyes snapped back to Ginny, his mouth falling slightly open; his breath rushed roughly out his lungs as though he'd been punched. "W-what?" There was a strained tone to his voice, almost painful.

"You didn't," she said, her eyes pleading to reason with him. "You never did, you didn't-"

"Why not?" he snarled. "Because it 'wasn't me'? Because it was my 'demonic friend'? Why don't you try telling the truth for once in your life?!"

"It doesn't matter!" she shouted at him. "I didn't love him. He was my brother's best friend, what was I ever going to do about it? I didn't love him – I never could have loved him – the way I love you! And it really doesn't matter, anyway, because he's – he's dead now, and-"

“ONLY BECAUSE I MURDERED HIM!” Tom roared.

She flinched, taking a step back.

Tom shoved a hand backwards through his hair. “You’re even terrified of me now,” he muttered darkly, and without any further warning, pushed past her and disappeared, the front door slamming loudly behind him, a bang, a sharp tone, a tone of finality.

The end?

Very slowly, she turned back to face Bernard. “This was what you wanted, right?” she asked, her voice cold and detached. “Are you happy now?”

“Well, I had planned to-”

She heaved a sigh, shaking her head. “Don’t bother,” she said tiredly. “Get out.”

To her surprise, he did. Only giving her a sympathetic look that was more patronising than comforting, Bernard moved through to the hallway and the door clicked quietly behind him. And she was left alone.

xxx

A/N: Aw, poor her. Yeah, my laptop’s died again, this time for good, I think, so updates may be more infrequent. Or they may be more frequent, actually, because the rest of the plot is all good up to October, I think. In the fic. Not in real life. Jeez. Please review!

I have to say, I was so tempted to put this:

Tom: -shocked- You would have killed her!

Bernard: And I would have succeeded, too, if it weren’t for those pesky kids and their damn dog!

LOL. I watch waaay too much Scooby-Doo. XD

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Tug Of War

Tom shoved a hand backwards through his hair. "You're even terrified of me now," he muttered darkly, and without any further warning, pushed past her and disappeared, the front door slamming loudly behind him, a bang, a sharp tone, a tone of finality. The end? Very slowly, she turned back to face Bernard. "This was what you wanted, right?" she asked, her voice cold and detached. "Are you happy now?"

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xxx

It was several hours before Tom returned home, and even longer before he would even let her explain. Every time she was near him, he was either staring at her face – at the small scar on her forehead where he'd thrown her into a glass cupboard – or at her swollen stomach, eight months along.

"How many times am I going to have to hurt you before you realise that I'm no good for you?" he had snarled when she once tried to reason with him.

Frankly, she was tired of it.

She was perfectly aware that the easiest solution to getting rid of the whole Bernard issue was by him dying, but she wasn't willing to stoop to that level. And she wasn't willing to let Tom stoop to that level – something that she was quite certain was also a reason for his silent tantrum.

However, she was also aware that this was the minority of the cause for his anger – the majority being the number of times he had hurt her,

directly or indirectly, and also, the issue of Harry Potter being brought up.

Ginny wasn't sure if she had ever specifically mentioned having dated other boys before she arrived in 1958, but she was sure she must have said something. Her relationship with Scott – a fling was probably the best word for it – was nothing that Tom worried about, because firstly, Ginny had made it quite clear with the violence and the screaming that she wasn't interested. Her and Terby – his attempts to kill her had somewhat dampened her attraction to him. And, beyond that, as far as Tom knew, there was no-one.

She sighed. Michael Corner. Seamus Finnigan. Colin Creevey. And... Harry Potter.

She hadn't loved Harry – not like that. Certainly, she'd thought she did at the time, but she realised now that it had been little more than a girly crush on someone she could never have. Love wasn't like that.

And yet Tom seemed unable to take that in.

It had come to this: she was standing near the living room, waiting for Tom to come home so that she could confront him. He was due home in two minutes, which meant he'd be here in four. He usually stayed back after work to talk to Mr. Flourish, who was now severely ill, and considering boosting Tom up the business ladder again.

At last, he pushed through the door. He ignored Ginny as he hung up his coat and took off his shoes; he looked as though he was going to walk right past her as though she was invisible.

"Tom," she said, her voice calm and pleasant. "Come and sit down. I need to talk to you."

He stopped mid-stride, his eyes flashing across to hers. "No."

"Dear, dear, Tom." It wasn't as though she hadn't expected this. She moved closer towards him, her arms folded tightly across her chest. "Sit."

Shaking his head, Tom laughed humourlessly. "I'm not scared of you, Ginevra."

"You should be. Sit."

He just looked at her as though she was crazy. "Why the hell would I be – SHIT." His sentence was abruptly cut off by her foot connecting with more intimate parts of his anatomy; he doubled up, gasping. "Fuck."

"I'm really sorry, Tom, but seriously – sit down." She felt bad, but if he was going to be so obstinate, then she was going to get violent.

"Are you crazy?" he gasped out, still bent double. She couldn't see his face, but she guessed that the expression on his pale, handsome face would be something like... pain, pain, and a bit more pain. "Shit," he groaned.

Ginny sat on the sofa and patted the seat beside her. He staggered towards her, wincing and swearing with every movement, and then eased himself carefully down next to her. "I'm sorry," she said again, "but you were being stubborn."

"What do you want?" he grumbled, shifting his position with a stifled gasp.

"To talk to you." She turned to face him completely. "Look, please listen to me." She sighed, and reached out for his face, her fingers curving around his jaw. "Okay?"

"...Fine." Tom's shoulders slumped, resigned.

"I have three things to say, and please hear them out." She took a deep breath. "Number one: I love you, so stop beating yourself up that I hate you. Number two: Bernard is an arsehole, and while I would like nothing more than the thought of him never bothering us again, I am not going to let you kill him. You are not that kind of purpose – you don't... hurt people... on purpose. Which brings me to my final point. Tom, you-"

She paused, looking carefully at him. He was avoiding looking at her, choosing instead to stare down at his hands.

“Tom. Tom.” She took his face in her hands again and turned him towards her. His eyes followed the rest of his face reluctantly, flickering up to watch her. “Listen to me. You are not a bad person. Okay, I will admit, that in my own era, I knew you as... Lord Voldemort. But you’re not him! You are not Lord Voldemort, you have never been Lord Voldemort, and you never will be Lord Voldemort. That’s all in the past. For me, at least. And for you, it’s nothing. It’s not your past, obviously, and it’s definitely not your future. You are perfect.”

The look in his eyes became sceptical.

“You are,” she insisted. “I married you, right? And anyway, you have to realise – I knew about all of this before I got to, you know, 1958. Before I met you as you. Before I started going out with you. And somehow, I fell in love with you anyway. Don’t you think that if I had been scared of you – if I had hated you – I would have run for the hills?” She pressed her lips to his. “And I haven’t, because you are a good person.” She kissed him again. “Alright?”

“No,” he mumbled against her lips.

“Grr!” she growled, drawing back from his face. A scowl fixed dangerously across her brow, and Tom’s hands moved defensively to protect himself. She had to laugh at this, despite everything. “I’m not going to hurt you again,” she reassured him. “And I’m really sorry about that.”

“It’s fine,” he muttered. He looked away from her, staring at the floor again. “What about that... boy? The one you... you... I...” His lungs constricted again, cutting off his words. She could see the strain in his throat as he struggled to finish his sentence. He couldn’t.

“His name was Harry Potter, and he was your enemy,” Ginny began to explain, thinking that it would be best to tell Tom the truth. The whole truth. “He was... the Chosen One. The one destined to bring you down.”

“That makes me feel better,” he said darkly.

“I’m not finished. Sshh. He was a year older than me – in the same year as my favourite brother, Ron, even though you’re not supposed to have favourites. Ron was his best friend. I was constantly forced into the presence of this awkward, famous boy, and I couldn’t help but be awed by him, and have his modesty make me shy as well. I... I suppose I deluded myself into thinking I loved him. I even went as far as mourning when he went out with other girls.” Ginny shook her head. “I was crazy. It didn’t matter, though – he never wanted me. And it took me a long time – so long - to realise that I never wanted him either. I only realised that when... I realised that I wanted you.”

Tom didn’t say anything, but he shifted in his seat, and she thought she saw a smile flicker on his lips. She rolled her eyes at how evidently pleased he was at himself.

“Look, you don’t have to be so angry with yourself for killing him,” Ginny said softly, taking his hand. “If it’s any consolation, he’s still alive, sort of. He hasn’t even been born yet, but when he is, he’s not hurt at all. He’s alive and well.”

He twitched, irritated.

Ginny laughed again. “Come on, be fair. You can’t have it both ways.”

Even Tom was able to smirk at that. The amusement slipped from his face, though, and his free hand moved to his forehead, holding his face. “I just... still can’t believe...” he sighed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I knew you would take it this badly,” she pointed out.

He shrugged. “And move on, eventually.”

“Really?” Her face lit up. “Are you seriously okay?”

“As long as it hasn’t happened yet, I can stop it from happening at all,” Tom said, and he moved to kiss her, pushing her back until she was pinned against the seat of the sofa.

Responding, Ginny’s hands curled into his hair, pulling his body close to hers as his mouth slipped from hers and trailed down her neck. Her fingers drifted to his collar, then sliding to the buttons at the front of his shirt. However, to her surprise, his hand caught hers, and she stopped.

“Wait,” he whispered, his breath cool across her throat. “Just... wait.”

She lay very still, and then his mouth moved back to her neck, resting beneath her jaw, at the pulse point where her blood flowed thick and fast. She could hear it pounding in her ears, and she suddenly understood that he could, too. He could feel her heartbeat beneath his lips.

xxx

On the afternoon of the fifteenth of June, Ginny received a very unusual package.

She always arrived home before Tom did, so she was the only one in the house when she found waiting for her a thick letter... and a large, disgruntled-looking brown-and-white cat. Bewildered, she crossed to the windowsill.

“Hello?” she said warily to the cat. It was vaguely familiar, and she scratched it behind the ears before dropping it to the ground and turning to the letter. The scrawled handwriting on the envelope revealed it to be Grace’s.

Oh. Grace’s cat. She glanced back at the fat feline before opening the letter, wondering why on earth she now had her cat.

Her mouth fell open.

Ginny,

I... I don't know how to write this. Luke and I are... running away. Together. Well, obviously. ...My father showed up. I never told you why he left, did I? He was – no, still is – as anti-Muggle as it gets. And... Jacob's only my half-brother. He's so special that he might as well be more, but he has a different father. A Muggle. I think mum got drunk at a party. I don't know. My father never found out that it wasn't his baby... until I was eight, and Jacob started school at Hogwarts. The teachers realised that he was a half-blood, and mentioned it to my father. I don't know the rest. He was gone by the time I woke up. Leah's also only a half-sibling.

The point is, Ginny, he's back now. And... well, he wasn't exactly chuffed when he heard that I was dating a Muggle. He told me never to see him again, and even threatened him in front of everyone. Luke wants us to run away. As far away as we can possibly go. Never come back. I said it wasn't what I wanted. I said we could go out in secret. He wouldn't listen. He thinks that I just want an excuse to break up with him... he thinks it's because of Alden.

He might be right.

I don't think I'll see you for a while. For a long time. I'll write to you as soon as I can... but by Muggle post. We can't let my father find us. We're going to pretend to be Muggles. I hope that everything can return to normal after I've gone. Take care of the cat. You can name him if you want. Leah wanted to name him Kitty. It works for me, but you can change it. I don't really mind. And, by the way – I haven't told Alden. And I'm not going to. It's probably better that way. By the time you read this, I will be already leaving. Again, I'm really sorry I had to do this to you.

Love, Grace xxx

"Oh my God," she gasped. "No!"

It was impossible. Grace's father... but he had left, so many years ago. More than a decade, now – it was simply ludicrous. And yet there it was, in black and white, in ink, on paper. It was true.

Grace had run away.

“Alden!” she cried, and, tripping over the cat but ignoring it completely, she ran to the door. She grabbed her coat and her shoes, and then leapt through the doorway, Apparating immediately. She didn’t care that Grace had said, indirectly, not to tell Alden. This was far too important, far too drastic.

She reappeared in front of the new apartment that he had recently bought to share with a few of his friends from the Ministry training course – one of whom was Jack Swithin, but the rest, who she didn’t know very well at all.

Knock-knock-knock.

Not waiting for an answer, Ginny kicked frantically at the door. “ALDEN!” she yelled. One of the people in the neighbouring apartments, an elderly lady, gave her a disapproving look and then went back inside. Ginny disregarded this, and was about to scream again when the door swung open.

“I think it’s for you, Philips,” said a bewildered Jack Swithin, stepping out of the way.

Pregnancy hormones, stress and panic all building up on her, Ginny burst into tears. “Alden!” she cried as soon as her friend appeared.

“Whoa, calm down,” he said, puzzled. He walked to her and tried to hug her but she just ducked away and instead shook the letter at him.

“Grace – Alden – Alden, it’s Grace – she’s – she’s-”

“She’s what? What’s wrong?” Alden was quite pale now, despite his naturally olive complexion. Anything to do with Grace was serious business. “Ginny, what’s happening?”

“She’s run away!” the redhead wailed.

Alden’s eyes widened. He didn’t speak; just snatched the letter from her and read through it, much quicker than she had. He stared blankly into space for a moment, and she knew that he was

calculating... she knew that he was hatching a brilliant plan. She knew that face. She hopped up and down, silently cheering for his fantastic brain.

“Right, let’s go,” he said a moment later. He made no excuse to Swithin, but shut the door immediately behind him, grabbed her hand and Apparated (he lived in a Wizarding apartment block, so he didn’t have to take precautions about where he Apparated and who he did it in front of).

When they re-emerged into reality, they were in a cloakroom. They pushed on, excusing themselves to an alarmed member of staff, and then Ginny saw that they were in a train station... with what looked like only one train.

“Where are we?” she demanded.

“This is Castledon-Bailey station,” Alden explained quickly, pulling her through thick crowds of people. “She said in the letter that she was getting as far away as possible. To do that she would need to leave the country. She also said that she was going to pretend to be a Muggle, with Luke. The fastest way to leave the country by Muggle means is by the CBE – the Castledon-Bailey Express. She should be here...” There was a desperation in his voice, and Ginny hoped he was right.

Even more so than that, she hoped that they weren’t already too late.

“The train is still here,” he deduced from looking at a large and complicated board covered in times and locations. “The next departure is to Bordeaux, in ten minutes. She should still be here – she wouldn’t have left yet.”

“Come on, then!” she snapped, tugging impatiently on his sleeve, and she hurried with him through to the platform.

Unluckily – of course, nothing was ever easy for Ginny – they were stopped by a policeman. “Excuse me, can I see your tickets?”

“No, no, we have to get the train, or we’re going to miss it!” Ginny lied, shouting at him. “Please, out of the way! The man in the funny hat can inspect our tickets once we’re on the train – just, please-”

“I’m afraid I can’t let you through without-”

“Our daughter is dying!” Alden suddenly hollered at the policeman, startling even Ginny into silence. He pointed angrily to Ginny’s bloated stomach. “Do you see that? If we don’t get on that train, then we’ll miss the medication imports, and our baby will die!” The volume of his voice was rising steadily. He was close to screaming. “Do you understand?”

The policeman took an unsteady step back. “Er-”

By this time, though, Ginny and Alden had already rushed past him.

“Good thinking,” she complimented him.

“Thanks.”

Then they were on the platform, and the train was in sight. But, of more immediate importance, they could see, in the distance, a woman with curly brown hair, and a gangly ginger man.

“There!” Ginny yelled, and she screeched to a standstill, dragging air into her lungs to shout. “Grace, you freaking idiot, get your arse back here or I will make you wish you’d never been born!”

Even though Grace was so far away, Ginny saw her tense; she’d heard. She kept going though, on towards the train.

Then Alden bellowed, “GRACE!”

And Grace froze.

Alden kept running while Ginny had stopped, so she had to race on her stumpy, short little legs to catch up. She didn’t hear what was happening, but through the crush of people moving urgently around

her, she saw glimpses – Luke trying to pull her towards the train doors, Alden grabbing her wrist.

Tug of war. Literally.

When Ginny caught us, the conversation had already started, and, so it seemed, was already ending.

“Grace, you can’t go with him,” Alden was saying desperately.

“Give me one good reason not to.”

“You...” Alden seemed to be struggling here. “You just can’t.”

“Can’t I?” Grace hissed, vicious. As she said this, she looked directly into her ex-boyfriend’s brown eyes, and something in her face broke. “Say it,” she said suddenly, unexpectedly.

“What?” Alden seemed as confused as Ginny was.

“The one thing you never said – say it!” Grace was almost pleading, but angrily. It was surreal. “It’s the easiest thing in the world. Say it, and I’m yours.”

Luke’s face was a picture of defeat and this last statement. Ginny thought that he had known all along that when it came down to a choice between him and Alden, the latter was always going to win. There was still a trace of hope for him, though, as Alden looked still baffled by Grace’s demand.

“You can’t, can you?” Grace said furiously. “You still can’t!”

“I don’t even know what I’m supposed to say!” Alden yelled, losing his patience. Behind them all, the train tooted, urging latecomers to hurry up and get on the train before it departed from the station.

“EXACTLY!” Grace shouted. “That’s the whole point! You still don’t even know! You haven’t changed! I thought you might have, but you haven’t – and I’m never going to even consider taking you back until you do!”

"I love you!" Alden exclaimed. "I've said that three times now – is that it? Is that enough?"

Grace just looked at him, the shine in her eyes something more like venom than tears. "It wasn't enough for you," she said quietly. "Why the hell should it be enough for me?"

"That was different!" he tried to excuse himself, somewhat pathetically, Ginny had to say.

"How was it different?" The knuckles tightly gripping her suitcase handle were white, protruding scarily from her hands. "Alden, I waited for you. I gave you your chance. And you missed it." She yanked her wrist out of his hands, turned, and took a few shaky steps towards the train-

"Look, you can't do this!" Alden shouted, running after her. "You don't love him!"

"I don't love you, either!" she screamed, whirling back to face him.

Ginny grimaced. What Grace had just said – seemingly without realising it – was not just a denial to loving Alden, but also agreeing that she didn't love Luke. Both men gaped at her, shocked.

Tears streamed down Grace's face, and she stumbled away from Alden. "Come on," she said to Luke, her voice, her body, everything, trembling. "Let's go."

Luke didn't move. He stared at Alden. "You just used me to make him jealous, didn't you?"

"What?" she said faintly.

"Well, that's what you got... but, no. You're not happy with that." His voice was soft, steady, as though he didn't care. Ginny remembered that he had wanted to be an actor. She only saw through his façade because of her practice on Tom. Luke's face was close to Grace's. "How many hearts are you going to break?"

Grace's face crumpled. "Luke-"

He sighed. "Don't bother." He picked up his suitcase and slammed the train door closest to him shut. "Go home to your dad. Tell him not to worry." And without any further word to her, he left.

"Oh," Grace cried, a hand flying to her mouth. She turned back to Alden, but he had already gone. "No-" The tears flowed freely down her cheeks now. For the first time, she noticed her other friend. "Ginny-"

The redhead hugged her. "Sshh, it's okay. Come on." Ginny took her away, past the sceptical and confused policeman that Alden had shouted out. "I guess you want your cat back, then?" She tried to change the topic to make Grace feel better and stop crying.

To her dismay, though, Grace only started crying harder. "That was me and Luke's cat. Together. Us. No – no, you keep it – well – I'll just-" she choked her words a bit here "-see if Luke wants him, you know, at uni, and then – I can – you can have him – so post him to me-"

"Er." Ginny didn't know much about charity appeals, but she was pretty sure that posting cats came under animal abuse. "Or, you know, you could just take him home with you when you leave my house?" she offered.

"Or that," Grace hiccoughed.

Ginny squeezed the brunette in a one-armed hug. Bad things happened in threes, right? Failing her first newspaper article... Tom finding out about Voldemort... Luke and Alden having a tug-of-war over Grace and then quite spectacularly falling out with each other... it could only get better from here, she was certain.

xxx

A/N: Okay, some people didn't get Russian roulettes. It's basically a mafia game with, obviously, a high death rate. The idea is that you get a revolver (a type of gun), put one bullet into one of the six bullet-spaces, and spin the cylinder, which is where the bullets are. The players then have no idea where the bullet is. They take it in turns putting the gun to their head and pulling the trigger. It's just this gambling thing, because the idea is that no-one knows who's going to survive and who's going to get their brains blown out.

Anyway, I hope you liked this chapter. I had fun hitting a Dark Lord in the balls. XD REVIEW.

Xxx

Chapter Thirty: What Ifs, Maybes, And Broken Teaspoons

Ginny squeezed the brunette in a one-armed hug. Bad things happened in threes, right? Failing her first newspaper article... Tom finding out about Voldemort... Luke and Alden having a tug-of-war over Grace and then quite spectacularly falling out with each other... it could only get better from here, she was certain.

xxx

So far, Ginny was having a brilliant day.

June the twenty-eighth. Monday. It was raining. She didn't take her umbrella to work because she would be Apparating. She stepped outside her apartment, and was distracted by the sight of a small child crying. Therefore, she wasn't paying attention when she Apparated, and left part of her eyebrow the hallway, while the rest of her ended up two feet to the right of her eyebrow. She didn't want to be late for work by calling Healers, so instead she tried to mend it herself. She failed. She decided not to risk Apparating again and set her mind on walking. But, alas, it was raining, and she had no umbrella. She realised that she was locked out of the apartment, as Tom had the keys and had left before her. She walked three miles in the pouring rain to the Daily Prophet headquarters... only to be told that she was being awarded maternity leave.

And she was sent home.

Three miles.

In the rain.

Without an umbrella.

Yup. Her day was just fan-friggin-tastic.

On the plus side, she had been given boatloads of baby presents, which she was very grateful for – she wasn't good with expenses. She fell for the first cheesy marketing slogan she saw and bought every product they had. She always returned from the supermarket

with a guilty look on her face, already expecting the half-hearted telling-off from Tom that she knew she was get.

“Not again” was usually how these telling-offs started. They would then proceed towards “are you ever going to learn to control yourself” and “honestly, if someone displayed selling your own head in bright enough colours, you would do it”. She knew them off by heart by this point.

The baby stuff was useful, and – Ginny was very pleased with this – colourful. She had individual pieces of wood from both Louise and Beth, which, somehow, apparently, slotted together into a cot... not that she could tell anyone. From Will Gallantree, she had received what seemed to her a lifetime supply of baby food, but which she suspected would only last her a few days. Even Angeline had begrudgingly given her something... a pink rattle. For her sake, Ginny hoped the baby was a girl.

The only downside to this vast amount of presents was carrying all home in the aforementioned rain. She could shrink them all, and make them weightless, and then put them in her pockets, but then she feared they would all get broken, and then she'd have to buy things. Which was never good.

This was the problem she now battled.

“If you stack them neatly enough,” said Beth, “then they won't fall over and break.”

“I can't stack things!” Ginny wailed. “I can barely avoid falling on them! Anyway, how,” she felt it was necessary to point out, “do you suggest I stack about, I don't know, fifty random pieces of wood?”

Beth eyed the gift she and Louise had given. After a moment, she shrugged. “Beats me. Make a tepee.”

“A tepee is not helpful right now!” the redhead shrieked.

Flinching, Beth commented, “Wow, pregnant people really do have emotional issues.”

"I DO NOT HAVE EMOTIONAL ISSUES!" Ginny screamed.

"Tell that to the deaf woman in Wales who just heard you in perfect clarity," Beth cackled.

"You," Ginny said huffily, "are not helpful." She decided to screw the possibility of everything breaking, and crammed the gifts into her pockets, once shrunk. She gave Beth a haughty look, but then amended with a hug; she also embraced Louise, and then waddled awkwardly to the door.

"Haha," she heard from behind her.

"What?" she snapped, turning back to her friends, irritation flaring.

"You walk like a duck," Beth sniggered.

"You look like a duck," Ginny retorted.

"Yeah, well, you're fat."

"I'm pregnant; what's your excuse?"

Beth scowled, even though the slight, skinny brunette knew she was far from chubby. Ginny grinned at her, and then made her way out into the storm.

It took a little over an hour to get home, and when she did, she was absolutely certain that the sky had dumped its entire capacity in her hair, her face, and her shoes. She felt cross at the droughts in Africa – why didn't the world try evening out the wetness instead of dumping it all on her head?

She tipped water out of her boots and then stashed them in the cupboard with her coat, scarf, and her poor sodden hat. She then emptied the baby things onto the living room... and realised that she had nowhere to put any of it.

Moving through to the bedroom, Ginny began attempting to move furniture, simultaneously running through baby-names in her head.

James, we liked. Edward. Tom. Hm, been used. Max. Ben. Harry. Ron. Fred. George. Percy. Arthur. Bill. Charlie. Bill Riddle. Hehe. It would be like Bill Rill-

Crash.

The shelves fell down on her, and she disappeared under a waterfall of heavy hard-back books, with only a squeal as she drowned under their weight.

"He has far too many books," she grumbled under her breath as she squirmed out, a pain in her face. She clung to what she suspected would be a black eye, shoving books aside. They needed space for a baby's cot, and a million books were not helping. She recovered from the wardrobe one of her cardboard boxes from moving in, which she had never unpacked, and began rifling through it to make space for getting rid of extra books.

Her fingernails scratched something hard, and brass glinted out of the corner of her eye. She focused her attention, and dug through the box again, look for whatever that shiny thing she had seen was. She was in the mood for something shiny. And, finally, she found...

A battered, dusty Time-turner.

Ginny lifted it into her hand, twisting it this way and that. It glimmered faintly under a sheen of dust, marvellous even in abuse, and she couldn't help but wonder...

Tom knew.

And if she told him... where she was going, she meant.

Or... her eyes widened as another thought struck her.

If she took him with her.

Anticipation, excitement, worry, panic – she clutched her hands together, feeling sick. What if she didn't want to come back? What about Grace, and Alden, and Luke, and Beth, and Louise – and the baby? Tom wouldn't want to stay in the future; he'd come back. She'd be alone... but with her family, with her old friends, and that was worth it, wasn't it? Family first, right?

But wasn't this her new family? Tom, and the baby?

She twisted with uncertainty.

What if nothing had changed? What if, for some reason, she hadn't been able to stop Tom from becoming Lord Voldemort at all? Maybe she had died; maybe Bernard had succeeded. Maybe Tom had become just as bad as he had sworn that he would never be. Maybe she just couldn't stop him. And everything was still the same. Her family, her friends, Dumbledore – would they blame her?

Her stomach lurched.

Would they even want to know her, if they realised that she'd been... 'fraternising with the enemy', as Ron said?

She felt even sicker.

Did she still exist? Was there an empty hole where a Ginny Weasley should be? If that was so, then surely her family would never let her leave. 'You're not putting us through that again,' they'd said. 'You're not leaving us and letting us worry ourselves sick'. Or, was there another Ginny, leading her life? Maybe still thinking that she loved Harry, still leading Seamus on cruelly, still resenting Luna? Or... just... nothing? As though she had never even been born?

The questions were too much to handle. Her hands were trembling violently, her shoulders shaking with dry sobs. She dropped the Time-Turner with a small outcry of 'oh!', and stumbled to her feet.

Calm down, calm down, breathe-

She staggered blindly towards the kitchen, tears finally streaming down her face. She couldn't take the indecisiveness. What was she going to do? It couldn't possibly work. She sobbed, groping for something to hold onto and comfort her, anything – maybe some food to reassure her, a hot drink-

And she fell over a large, furry obstacle.

Oh. Kitty.

Ginny had completely forgotten about him. This morning – also part of her bad day – she had bid Tom farewell, giving him a goodbye kiss, and then turned back to the apartment to see a fat, alarmed cat tied up on her window-sill again. The letter from Grace to explain was still sitting on the coffee table, opened:

Me and Luke bought him together... he kind of has a sentimental value to us. And now that we're not 'us' anymore... well, I don't know. I just think it's too soon for us to be confronting each other about giving back the other's things; like the jumper he lent me, and the beanie hat I let him keep. All those things. I think it's just better that he stays with you for a while, if that's okay.

And thus, temporarily, at least, Ginny now owned a cat. A rather fat, grumpy one, at that – with a habit of lying flat on his stomach so that the already-clumsy redhead would fall over him.

It was because of this that she now found herself falling towards the kitchen counter at high-speed, screeching and clawing at the cupboards to keep herself up, until-

Thumpclattercrash.

xxx

Tom came home to the smell of cooking. Or, rather more accurately, burning.

"Hello?" he called warily, hanging up his coat. "Is there a fire?"

“Hi, Tom!” Ginny chirped cheerfully. There was no sign now of her tears on her face, though half of her eyebrow was still missing from her Apparating mishap, and she had a black eye from the book avalanche. “Welcome home.”

He eyed her, suspicious. “What happened to your eye?” he asked. “And... why are you... cooking?”

She crossed her arms, affronted. “Is there a reason why a housewife can’t cook in her apartment?”

“Well, for one thing, I would have never associated you with the word ‘housewife’,” he smirked, ducking to kiss her, “and secondly – you, quite simply, cannot cook.”

“I can, too!” she exclaimed. “I made dinner, see?” She pointed to one pan full of brown mush. “Baked beans,” she then pointed to a frying pan with what looked like ash in the bottom of it, “and bacon.”

“What about toast?” he teased.

“Meh. I tried.” She shrugged, turning back to her burning crap. “It turned out terrible.”

He arched one eyebrow. “And this is good?”

She shot him a hazel scowl over her shoulder. “This,” she declared adamantly, “is fantastic!”

There was a moment’s silence behind her. She had a feeling that Tom was staring at her, confused. However, this theory was quite wrong, as the flames beneath the pans fizzled out, and the contents disappeared. “Hey!” she cried, spinning back to face Tom.

He had his wand out, and was pointing it at the pans. He stowed it back in his pockets, and then looked at her with an exasperated expression on his face. “What have you done?”

“Nothing!”

He didn't say anything; his eyebrows lifted slightly.

"Well." Ginny twisted her hands together. "Um. How would you react if, say, hypothetically, that... erm, someone... broke a plate."

Tom sighed. "You broke a plate."

"And a bowl."

"And a bowl," he repeated.

"And three glasses. And a teaspoon."

He dragged a hand down his face. "Hypothetically," he said wearily.

"Yeah."

Tom shook his head. "My reaction? I have to admit, I would be slightly annoyed, and also curious as to how you can break a teaspoon."

Ginny twitched her shoulders. "Dunno. It just... broke."

"I thought this was hypothetical," he said bemusedly, a smirk playing across his lips.

"Oh yeah." She flushed red.

"Good God, what am I going to do with you?" Tom sighed again. "Direct me to the damage."

She pointed at a large lump on the kitchen counter, covered by a towel. Tom muttered a quick repairing incantation, and then turned back to her. "Why couldn't you do that yourself?"

"I was... shaken," she said, something that was, admittedly, perfectly true. "I didn't want to make it any worse."

“Good point.” He restored the objects to their rightful places. “Remind me why exactly you decided to go on a vicious rampage against my cutlery, anyway?”

“And three glasses, and a bowl, and a plate,” she added helpfully. “Besides, it wasn’t my fault!” She pouted. “I just fell over the cat, that’s all.”

Slowly, Tom turned to stare at her. “The cat?”

She giggled. “Oh yeah. By the way, Tom, we have a cat.”

She moved through to the living room, explaining why they now had Kitty as she attempting to find the fat brown-and-white cat. She located him on top of the wardrobe in their bedroom, but, to her dismay, she couldn’t reach. “Well. He’s up there.”

Tom eyed the feline beast, and then carefully retrieved – “Ah, crap!” he suddenly swore, snatching his hand back.

Kitty dived from the wardrobe ceiling and scampered along the floor before Ginny scooped him up, cooing. He gave the redhead a wounded look.

“Aw, Tom, you hurt him,” she complained, tickling him under the chin.

“It,” her husband said incredulously, “hurt me!” He was indeed nursing his hand, which she could see bore three long, red, painful-looking scratches.

“Really, Tom,” she scoffed. “You’re bigger than he is. And he’s not an ‘it’.”

“Does it-” (there was a slight emphasis on the word ‘it’, but Ginny ignored this) “have a name, then?”

“Yeah.” She set the cat on the floor. “He’s called Kitty.”

“Hm.” Tom frowned down at him. “I think I’ll just call it ‘the cat’.”

Ginny laughed. "Honestly, you're so defensive of who's the alpha male in this household," she chuckled. She let Kitty fall gracefully onto the floor, where he then ran away at high speed to hide under the sofa. She then picked up Tom's hand to inspect it. "Oh, you're hardly going to die." She turned the hand this way and that; she drew her wand and healed the scratches. Then she bent to touch her lips lightly to the healed skin. "There. All better."

She lifted her eyes to his and found that he was watching her with a soft expression, all his irritation slipped from his face. She smiled, and was about to ask teasingly 'what are you looking at' when he dropped his head to crush her mouth beneath his.

For a moment they just stood pressed together; then her hands covered his heart, fleeting beneath the material of his jumper and shirt; his hands moved to the back of her neck, his thumb tucked under her jaw, over a pulse point that sent shivers down her spine.

His fingers drifted, and then he broke away, pinching a brass chain between his fingertips. He tugged lightly on it, and the Time-Turner slid out into view.

"What's this?" he asked curiously, his eyes flickering from the Time-Turner to her face and back again.

She sighed, her breath fanning across his face. Her hand moved to cover his, and she took the Time-Turner in her own fingers. "It's... it's a Time-turner," she said quietly, and looked up at him meaningfully.

His eyes widened slightly. "It's...?" He inspected it closely, and several moments of silence passed before he seemed to realise that she was wearing a time-travel device. He jerked slightly, blinking. "Why are you – are you–"

All of the colour drained from his face.

"You're – no, you're not – not again–" he dragged in a deep breath, and she could see that he was starting to panic. "You're not – are you?"

“No, no, no, I’m not going to go,” she said quickly, and she heard his breath rush out, relieved. “But... I want to.”

He stopped breathing. He was staring down at her, his jaw tight. She could see nothing in his eyes. Then, very slowly, and very quietly, he repeated, “You... want... to... go?” – trying them in a different order, seeing what they meant like that.

“Oh, Tom, I’m not-” She reached and took his face in both her small hands. “No – I - ...I... I want you to... come with me,” she whispered.

His brow furrowed, completely confused. “What? But - why?”

She laughed nervously. “Because I don’t want to go anywhere without you,” she said, as though this were obvious. “And...”

Here was the hard bit. She swallowed past a lump in her throat.

“Tom... Tom, listen, I – I...” She took a deep breath, forcing herself to continue. She’d started. It was too late to go back now. “Tom, I want you to meet my family.”

xxx

A/N: O-M-F-G! Teehee. Ah, how many of you think it’s actually going to go to plan? LOL. So naïve, so naïve. –giggle- I can’t wait. Please review for the next chapter to come up really quickly!

Okay, I had loads of questions asked, so here are the answers.

GoldenFawkes: Yeah, Tom, is like uber-powerful, but where exactly is he going to show it? There isn’t really a job application for flaunting your power... apart from being a Dark Lord. And that has, thankfully, been eliminated. He is climbing up the business ladder, though. That’s a cliché phrase, but he is. Ish.

Storm-brain: I suppose no-one sane would play Russian Roulette, but then again, Bernard was crazzy, and Ginny and Tom were kind of blackmailed it.

Sarah1281: Yeah, I know, that wasn't brilliantly clear. I'll probably go back and revise it. The idea – which I probably didn't get across – was that Grace's mum had no idea that Jacob wasn't her husband's child, but the Sorting Hat realised that he was a half-blood, and while the teachers knew this, they never really saw it of any importance, and never directly told the Hartwins... until a parents' evening, when maybe Jacob was getting bullied or something, and they would have been liked "and I know he's been having difficulties with the other kids because he's a half-blood and all" – cue "WHAT?" (: Sorry it wasn't clearer.

PLEASE REVIEW OR MY EVIL FLYING MONKEYS WILL DEVOUR YOU.

Xxx

Chapter Thirty-One: Playing God

“Tom... Tom, listen, I – I...” She took a deep breath, forcing herself to continue. She’d started. It was too late to go back now. “Tom, I want you to meet my family.”

xxx

“Are you ready?”

Then:

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Then:

“Do you want-”

“Shut up,” Ginny snapped, “and put this over your head.” Her nerves were stretched to breaking point, and this, paired with pregnancy hormones, was, quite frankly, making a bitch of her.

Tom fell silent, obviously realising that now was probably not the best time to be nit-picking tiny details, and slipped the chain of the Time-Turner over his head. He had to bend very low to keep it around Ginny’s neck as well, and even then it seemed close to strangling him.

She fiddled with the dials on the Time-Turner, fumbling to spin it the right amount of times. Then she reached into her pocket for Dumbledore’s wand.

It was the special one – the one with Runes. It had taken close to two weeks to get it from Dumbledore; it had been very difficult, as well, and she was immensely relieved that she had been able to succeed. It was hidden in his office, and under an enchanted barrier, but she knew things about the future-Headmaster/present-Professor, and had guessed the secret code – eventually revealing it to be Arianna, the name of his Squib sister who had died. She had left a note saying, I will return it as soon as I can, in pristine condition, and just hoped that

he wouldn't call the Ministry on her for thieving and illegal time-travelling.

"Hold on," she said, and then pointed the wand at both of them, stretching her arm out as far as she could. "Portus." She then tucked both her normal wand and the special wand into the waistband of her skirt.

Of course, I could just wait for time to drag us back after our objective has been achieved... but it's probably better to limit the amount of holes torn in the universe.

Tom shifted, waiting for something to happen, and then-

The world blurred.

Red, green, purple, yellow – it was like being trapped in a glass prism with light shining in from all angles. Suddenly afraid, Ginny gripped Tom's arm, crushing the side of her face against him, and, with her eyes shut, she waited for it to end.

Finally, it did.

She was hurled out into bright sunlight. She crashed down, face-first, into snow, and blinked, bewildered.

"Tom?" she called, her voice muffled by the snow and the long grass underneath it. "Are you there?"

"I seem to be." A cool hand wrapped around her upper arm and carefully pulled her to her feet. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She brushed frost off her face. "Er. I think so." She pushed red hair out of her eyes, and then turned to survey their surroundings. They were now standing in someone's back garden. She huffed. "Well, it's nice to know that our apartment gets demolished."

"We should probably buy a house," Tom commented.

“Probably.”

Ginny glanced back to check that no-one in the house was watching through the windows or something, and then took Tom’s hand to Apparate. “To Ottery St. Catchpole,” she declared, grinning at him despite the anxiety pulsing through her faster than blood.

Crack.

They reappeared on the same dirt road that Ginny had Apparated onto some four months previously, when she had stolen the Weasley heirloom. However, this time, it was caked in wintry ice, and the first thing that happened was that she slipped and fell onto her rear end.

“Ow,” she complained, and, wordlessly, Tom helped her up for the second time. He had, somehow, maintained his balance in both of two times that she hadn’t. He seemed to be far better at time-travel than her.

“Where to?” Tom asked.

She pointed, and they moved carefully down the slippery road towards the Burrow.

As they neared it, Ginny’s heart beating louder and more desperately in her ribcage, the sounds of shouting and laughter were heard raucously from the household. She smiled despite herself. Never, at any point, would the Burrow have been quiet.

She slipped through the creaky front gate and picked her way past bedraggled, half-melted snowmen and snow-forts to the front door. She glanced at Tom quickly for reassurance, but he seemed to be even more nervous than she was. She took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

“Door!” someone yelled from inside.

“Why don’t you get it, you lazy pr-”

“Language!” Someone else said threateningly. “Honestly, you’re lucky your mother didn’t hear that, or she’d-” The door swung open, and a tall, thin man turned to face the two people on the front perch. “Er. Hello?”

Ginny tried to say ‘hi’, but, to her alarm, she seemed to have forgotten how to speak. Or move. Or blink. Or breathe.

Tom kicked her ankle.

“Ow,” she gasped, dragging in air. “Oh. “ She felt like she was going to faint. “Hi, dad.”

Arthur Weasley frowned at her. He was exactly as he’d always been, balding, lopsided glasses, battered robes. Same as always. Nothing different. Except... “Dad?” he repeated.

Ginny’s face crumpled. He... didn’t know who she was. He didn’t remember her. He didn’t even care. For all he knew, she was just some random girl off the street. He couldn’t tell her apart from the next girl. She felt herself falling a thousand feet-

“Yes, we are,” Tom suddenly said, and the look of confusion on Arthur Weasley’s face deepened. “We are very glad to see you.”

“Oh, of course.” The older man scratched his head. “Right. I thought I heard... no, never mind. Well. Can... can I help you?” He still looked completely nonplussed.

A hand gripped Ginny’s arm, and it was only when everything in her vision became clearer that she realised she had been swaying. Tom stepped slightly in front of her, guessing that her ‘father’ would probably be rather worried if she showed signs of having a breakdown.

“We’re... family,” Tom said hesitantly. “We heard that you lived in this area, and thought we’d come and introduce ourselves.” He glanced back at Ginny, his concerned eyes flickering over her face. He then turned back to the doorway. “May we come inside?”

“Certainly!”

Ginny heard footsteps, and then Tom looked over at her again. “Are you alright?” he asked in an undertone.

“Mm-hm,” she said, her hum of a voice slightly higher than normal. She moved around him to step into the building, walking uncertainly through the hallway.

“You must be a Prewett, is that right?” Arthur’s voice startled her, and she froze again. “You look very like my wife, Molly.”

She was cringing backwards, she realised, and she tried to straighten up. She avoided his eyes. “...Yeah.” Her hand drifted awkwardly to the back of her neck, tugging her hair.

Arthur looked at her for a moment, probably wondering what was wrong with her. “Molly!” he called after a second. “Molly, we have guests. I don’t know if you were expecting them, but they’re here!”

“Oh!” Immediately, Ginny’s small, chubby mother bustled into the hallway, dusting her hands off on her apron. “I wasn’t expecting anyone – oh, I’m terribly sorry, the house isn’t usually this untidy, it’s just – well, never mind.” She smiled broadly at the two ‘strangers’ in her doorway. She bounced forwards to kiss them both on the cheek. “Hello, I’m Molly. And you are?”

Ginny stiffened. She swallowed. This wasn’t as easy as she had imagined it would be. “I’m... I’m Ginny – Peregrine. Riddle. Weas-” She panicked. “Prewett!”

“Ah, I thought you might be some relation.” Molly nodded, but Ginny did not look up at her. “And you?” she asked of Tom.¹

“Tom.” He nodded respectfully at Molly and Arthur, though Ginny could see how awkward he felt.

“Lovely to meet you. Did you know that I was going to name my daughter ‘Ginny’?” Molly said, chuckling.

“You have a daughter?” Tom asked, and that was too much for Ginny.

A daughter? A daughter who’s not called Ginny? Who’s not me?

“Excuse me,” she blurted out as fast as she could, and then disappeared down the hallway to the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind her. She pressed her back tight against it, her chest heaving with heavy breath, heart pounding. She strained to hear the conversation outside.

“Is she alright?” Molly’s voice was asking worriedly.

“Yes, she’ll be fine.” Tom fell silent for a moment, and then she thought she heard him say quietly, “Her family died a while ago. I think you remind her of them.”

Oh, but how true that was. Ginny squeezed her eyes shut. A throbbing ache had started in the back of her head, and she felt terribly sick.

“Your daughter?”

“She’s our youngest. As I said, we were considering calling her ‘Ginny’ – short for Ginevra, though, not Virginia... but we decided it was maybe a bit old-fashioned for a little girl.”

“What’s her name?”

“Victoria.”

Ginny’s hand flew to her mouth. Her mother had contemplated naming her Victoria – because of the victory on the day she was born, that Voldemort had fallen on that very day. And even in this seemingly parallel world, where there was no Voldemort... still, her double was called Victoria.

“Would you care to stay for lunch, Tom?” Arthur’s voice asked.

Footsteps neared the bathroom door. "I'll just see how my wife is faring." After a moment's silence, perhaps where the others left, a knock sounded lightly on the door. "Ginevra?"

She didn't answer; still hyperventilating; still panicking.

"Ginevra, open the door."

Very slowly, Ginny unlocked the door and pulled it open. Tom held her face and brushed tears away from her cheeks. "It's okay," he murmured. "It's okay."

"They're alive," she whispered, trembling under his fingers. Tears blurred her eyes again. "They don't remember me."

He sighed. "They've invited us to lunch, Ginevra," he told her, though she already knew. "Do you want to stay, or should we go home?"

"I am home," she told him, and it was only when he flinched that she realised what that would mean to him.

"Alright," he said, and let go of her. He turned and moved through a doorway. "Lunch would be very appreciated, thank you." She followed him, a few steps behind, and then peered around his side.

"Ginny," her 'mother' said warmly. "Are you feeling okay now?"

She nodded, speechless. She stared down at her feet, feeling like the frightened new girl on her first day of school.

"Molly, stop fussing," Arthur chided teasingly. "No-one's going to drop dead on your watch."

He always used to say that.

"Well, I'm Will," said someone, walking up to her and holding out their hand.

She looked warily up and saw Bill Weasley's face smiling down at her. His hair was shorter, less casually stylish, and he didn't have an

earring. He looked more serious without it. He looked to be about the age that he had been when he married Fleur, but there was no pale French beauty in sight.

Taking deep breaths, she shook his hand. “Ginny,” she said, raising her voice a little. She could do this. She wasn’t this weak.

And then, seeing her strength, they bombarded her.

“Charlie-” – taller, leaner, no dragon-burn over his eyebrow – Fleur!

“I’m George-” – Fred?

“And I’m Fred-” – George?

“Molly, but you’ve already met me, of course. There’s also my son, Ron, and Victoria, who I think I mentioned, and Percival, upstairs - but are you sure that you’re feeling-

“The name’s Arthur, by the way; I don’t think I ever formally introduced myself-”

Ginny was dragging in short, deep breaths, panic filling her system. She took multiple steps back towards Tom, towards safety, towards everything that was safe and normal and stable-

“Hey, mum, what’s going on?”

Ginny stood paralysed.

Dripping snow and shaking water out of her hair was a red-haired girl, exactly the same height as her – would be the same weight, if not for the pregnancy – as Ginny hadn’t grown in several years. Victoria Weasley, about fifteen or sixteen years old, pulled off her scarf and gloves, observing the situation with puzzlement and curiosity. Her hair was cut to the chin, messy. The only real differences between them was the scar on Victoria’s chin; the grace with which the younger girl carried herself; the blue eyes; and the face that was flawlessly pale, without freckles.

Victoria and Ginny stared at each other, trying to understand. Molly was talking, but neither of them could hear her. Neither of them cared.

“-some family, staying with us for lunch,” Molly finished explaining, and Ginny jerked back to reality, then observing the three who had appeared behind her younger double.

A gangly ginger boy, hazel-eyed. A girl with bushy brown hair and a tentative smile. A boy with a clear forehead where a scar should have been, glasses crooked on his nose.

“Hey,” Harry said, stepping forwards; Tom stiffened, clearly recognised the boy as the challenge to Ginny’s affections. “It was Tom, wasn’t it?”

“Voldemort?” Harry asked.

Ginny’s eyes widened, horrified. She looked up at Tom, but he didn’t seemed to have heard.

“Do you play Quiddit-”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Ron snapped, drawing his wand.

“We were playing some in the garden; I don’t know if you’re-”

“I have every right to be here!” Tom retorted. “Why should I listen to you?”

“I’m not really,” Tom shrugged, still glowering at Harry, “but Ginevra’s quite-”

“GET AWAY FROM HER!” Harry bellowed, and red light flared the sky, smashing plates, destroying the walls. “Don’t touch Ginny!”

Molly sobbed. “Please don’t hurt her! I’ll do anything – not my baby – just not my little girl-”

“We might play you after lunch, the-”

"I don't know what kind of sick game this is, but we're not playing it!" Arthur shouted. "Just leave her alone!"

"What?" Ginny cried. "What's – I don't-"

"Ginevra?" Tom asked. "Do you not want to play Quidditch? I mean, I can't argue there, but I thought you loved it-"

"She's mine – I can do whatever the hell I want with her!" Tom snarled.

"Of course, we can all see that," Ron yelled at him. "She's pregnant - you've already fucking raped her, haven't you? What more could you possibly want from a little girl?"

"Ron!" Ginny shrieked.

"Ginevra, what are you doing?"

"I said, she's mine!" Tom roared. "You just stay the fuck away from her – you lost her, and she's mine now!"

"I'm not anyone's!" Ginny yelled. "Just grow up – go away, all of you!"

"That's all you've ever wanted, isn't it – Voldemort. We know you!" Harry shouted. "You just do what you want with her and then you're just going to kill her, aren't you?"

"And what if I do?" Tom bellowed. "What if I do? What are you going to do about it? Look at your forehead now, no scar, you're not the Chosen One! What could you possibly do to stop me?"

"Stop it!" Ginny howled.

"Ginevra!" Tom grabbed her, but she screamed and hit him, staggering away backwards – she fell to the floor – curled up in a ball, screaming, crying, pressing her head between her hands, she didn't want to hear anymore-

“Look what you’ve done to her!” Charlie hollered, lunging forwards, punching Tom around the face as hard as he could – blood spurting from her husband’s nose, his mouth, his jaw at an odd angle – Charlie had always been the fighter, the dragon-tamer. “You never-” a kick in the stomach “-touch her-” shoving to the floor “-again-” a kick, already on the floor, ribs cracking, defenceless. “DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

“DON’T!” Ginny sobbed, tears streaming down her face. “Please – Tom!”

A flash of light – green light –

“TOM!” she screamed.

-but it was Charlie who fell –

Charlie screamed out. “Ginny... go...” he ground out, before it twisted into another scream. His hands twisted in horrific, demonic shapes as he battled his own mind. “GO!” he howled, and then a blood vessel burst in his temple and it was on Ginny and she was screaming screaming, screaming –

and then Hermione – her best friend-

“Hermione? Mione, did you hear the news? Harry got a-” the words were never finished because Ginny ran into her best friend’s room and came to see the bushy-haired Muggleborn on her bedroom floor, red and sticky and somehow a lot smaller than Ginny ever remembered, because her arms were in the corner, and her legs were mutilated, and her head was GONE and her best friend was in pieces, and she was screaming, screaming, screaming –

“No,” she moaned, slumping to the floor, her small, frail body racked with sobs, shaking uncontrollably, clawing at the floor – “Please - no!”

“Ginevra-” Tom reached her, picking her up carefully, and holding her at arm’s length. “Can you see me? Are you alright? Can you-”

Molly – her mother – her mother –

Molly Weasley was clinging to her husband, fear etching onto her features as she screamed. "Not my children!" she sobbed. "Not my children! Please!" Tears streamed down her face; Lord Voldemort laughed at the display of emotion. He waved his wand – with a twisted scream and in an explosion of blood, Bill fell. "NOT MY CHILDREN! PLEASE!" Ginny's mother screamed. Ginny stood watching, tears flowing. "Mum!" she screamed. "Mum!" Then the screaming rose up, higher and higher, and Ginny could only distinguish two phrases: from her mother, "Take me instead" and from Lord Voldemort, "Very well". Then the blood was everywhere, and the kitchen of the Burrow was destroyed by it and parts of the Weasley family were everywhere, and Ginny was screaming, screaming, screaming –

"MUM!" she screamed. "No – MUM – I want my – mum – no-"

A voice, distant, the three realities disappearing back into one, the original one: "I'm very sorry about lunch, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley – all of you – she just-" Someone scooping her up into their arms.

"Is she alright?" Molly asked concernedly.

She threw herself forwards, straining against Tom's strong arms, eyes blurred by tears, but she could still see her mother – "MUMMY -" she screamed, even though she hadn't referred to Molly that way since she was very young – "Tom – I want to go – I want to go home-"

"I am very sorry – we might come and see you again – I didn't expect – sorry – come on, Ginevra-" He carried her to the door, and then, some more mumbled goodbyes that she couldn't hear over her own sobs, they Apparated.

"No," she whispered as he twined the Time-Turner around her neck again, twisting the dials for her. She didn't question whether he knew how. She didn't care. She wanted to go home. And by home... she didn't mean 1961. "Tom – take me back – my mum – daddy – Ron – Mione – please – mum-"

"You know we can't," Tom told her quietly. "I don't think either of us could have guessed this would happen. We can't go back."

"TAKE ME BACK!" she screamed, twisting in his arms-

They slowly twisted and turned out of sight, disappearing into the swirling, colourful abyss.

xxx

Ginny blinked past her tears, confused. They had landed heavily, clumsily, in their apartment... but something was wrong. She climbed down from Tom's arms, slipping the Time-Turner away from her neck, and glanced around.

It was... similar to what it normally was – the furniture was the same, and she could see some of Tom's stuff – but she couldn't see any of her stuff. And it was messy. Now that was weird. There was grime on the coffee table, and books scattered and piled untidily on the floor; dust covered the shelves, there was mud scuffed on the floor, and the furniture was at strange angles. However, the most unusual of all was the vast quantity of empty Firewhiskey bottles strewn across the floor and every surface that she could see.

"Tom?" she asked, her voice very small. "When are we?"

He shifted, looking vaguely uncomfortable. "I have an inkling of an idea." Seeing that she was waiting for him to clarify, he cleared his throat, looking a bit out of place and awkward. "I'd say about March, April, 1960."

She looked at him, curious, but then she abruptly understood. "Oh." 1960. That was when she and Tom had... eh. Separated, briefly. She suddenly also felt very uncomfortable, and moved her weight from her right foot to her left. "Right."

And then a thought hit her, and she was frozen, wondering...

1960.

Tom saw her expression. "Ginevra?"

"1960," she whispered.

"What?" he frowned. "Is there-" Then understanding flickered across his face. He realised instantly what was going through her head. "No. Ginevra, you can't."

"They're still alive!" she pleaded. "I have to, Tom – please."

"No! You can't!" he said sharply. "Try to see sense. This isn't going to end well. It didn't go well meeting your - ... and this isn't going to-"

"You can't stop me!" she screamed at him. "You wouldn't let me see my family – you wouldn't take me back – and now – now –" She shook her head, desperate for an excuse. She had nothing. "I have to." She stumbled blindly for the door, throwing it open.

"No, Ginevra-!"

Crack.

She reappeared, dizzy, on the outskirts of the Hogwarts grounds. She didn't hesitate; she immediately ran up to the castle, stumbling across the long, thick grass. She knew she didn't have much time before Tom found her and stopped her.

Yes, she was being stupid. Yes, she was only going to hurt herself and everyone around her.

And yet she couldn't stop herself.

Ginny shoved through the heavy front doors of Hogwarts and turned to stare at the clock on the Entrance Hall wall. Tuesday. Ten-thirty. He had a free period, just before Arithmancy. He'd be hanging around class, waiting.

Just waiting.

“Ginevra-” A voice sounded behind her, hurrying closer. “Are you insane-?”

She sprinted away, dashing up the steps and into a secret corridor which she knew would lead her to another hidden hallway, and another, and then a passage to outside the Arithmancy classroom. She emerged out into the air some moments later, whirling around.

Where is he?

Philippa... that had been Tom. Philippa couldn't be saved... but... but perhaps he could...

And then she saw him.

“Scott!” she cried. It was a long shot that he would even talk to her – at this point, in March, it had been a long time since she'd spoken to him voluntarily. They weren't really friends anymore.

It was mean to assume, but if he really loved her... then he'd listen.

The only problem was that she didn't know what to say yet.

He frowned at her, not understanding; he looked even more confused by her suddenly being fatter, being pregnant, having a wedding ring on her finger – but when she threw her arms around his neck, sobbing, he didn't seem to mind.

“Ginny,” he exclaimed. “Ginny, what's happened? What's wrong? Is it Riddle? What's he done now? You know, I told you that he was only going to... but that doesn't matter. I'm really sorry. Are you alright?”

She tightened her arms around his neck, tears streaming down her cheeks. If only there was a way to save him.

And then she knew what she had to do.

Bernard shrugged. “I saw how close you were to Reeve and-”

Ginny put up her hands and shoved Scott violently away from her. "I HATE YOU!" she screamed.

Scott looked bewildered; he was still in shock. "What?"

"Get away from me! I hate you – you've always been the worst person to me. I can't take it! I HATE YOU! I never want to SEE you again!" She screamed until her throat was raw, until she couldn't breathe, until the tears threatened to drown her-

"Ginny, I didn't mean to-" Scott desperately started towards her, looking broken.

"Just go, Scott. Just GO!" She threw herself forwards, hitting every inch of him she could reach, kicking, punching, screaming, crying.

"Ginevra, that's enough." Someone was standing beside her, but she didn't care. Tom's arms folded around her carefully, pinning her flailing arms to her sides.

"What are you doing here?" Scott snarled at Tom. "All you've done is cause her pain, you know. Oh, I wish you could have been here when she was falling to pieces-"

Tom's arms tensed tightly around her, and she knew the pain he'd be in. He tried to move her away, but she just pitched forwards, still screaming, her legs kicking in the air in defiance. "I HATE YOU!" she howled. "I – I – no – I – no – SCOTT!!"

She needed him. She needed a friend. Harry. Ron. Hermione. Luna.

Philippa.

Scott.

"SCOTT!" she screamed. She needed him. "No – no!"

"Come on, let's go," Tom said quietly, and, with no regard for Scott, he dragged her away; her still thrashing desperately, bawling. "It's okay."

“No,” she sobbed, and she slumped, defeated, in his arms.

“It’s okay,” he murmured, and he picked her up again, cradling her against his chest like a baby. “It’s alright, see.”

“Tom,” she cried brokenly. She couldn’t help but wonder how much Tom must love her to be able to put up with all her stupidity and irrationality, and still be there to pick her up and hug her when she cried. She just buried her face in his neck like a baby as he carried her home through space and time.

xxx

When they got back to their own time – they checked with their bewildered neighbours; it was July 27th, 1961 – Ginny just staggered to the sofa and collapsed on it.

“Are you okay?” Tom asked carefully, sitting beside her.

“No,” she sniffled, burying her face in her hands.

He glanced up. “Merlin,” he said. “I didn’t realise that being a week late for our time period would get us so much post.” He tried to smile for her. “We must be popular.” He stood and crossed to the windowsill. “No. It’s just you that’s popular.” He shrugged. “Of course.”

Wiping her eyes with the heels of her hands, Ginny attempted to stop crying, and she sat up to receive the letters. She pushed some hair out of her face and flipped through them. Most were from Alden. A few were from Luke. One was from Beth. There wasn’t a single letter from Grace, which was surprising, as usually Ginny was sent daily instalments of her brunette best friend’s life.

She opened them one at a time, starting with the latest. It was from Alden.

Ginny,

It's incredible; you'll never believe it. Dominic's recovering! His brain and spine are intact, and he's showing signs of life. The doctors think that there's a chance of him waking up – and, because his central nervous system wasn't damaged, they think that he might be perfectly fine! There's even a possibility that he won't need a wheelchair, though I think that's quite slim. I'll keep you informed on what's happening.

No, I still haven't heard anything on why Scott won't talk to you. Maybe you should try talking to him. He'll listen to you, if anyone. Well, I honestly don't know. Don't tell my dad, though – Scott's becoming the perfect lawyer, and my dad would ki- ...hurt - you, if you did anything to disrupt that. Talk to you soon; respond as quick as you can!

-Alden

Ginny heaved a sigh. Of course Scott would hate her. She bit her lip. It didn't matter. At least he was alive. She looked sadly at the word 'ki-', where Alden had clearly begun to write 'kill' and then had stopped. Still taboo? So Philippa had still died, then. She sighed again.

I can't have everything.

Still, it was strange that there was no mention of Grace. Normally she was the first and only thing on Alden's mind.

Strange.

She flipped through the rest of them, scan-reading.

Luke said 'hi', told her what was happening at university. Again, he never mentioned Grace. Beth asked what Ginny was doing on Monday – a Monday that had already passed. She tossed that aside. The rest of Alden's letters were updates on Dominic's health... and slowly getting angrier and angrier at her lack of response.

The last letter from Alden – the most recent – was the one that made her sick.

Ginny,

I'm sick of it! You know, considering that Dominic's accident was partly your fault, you could at least try and pretend you cared! I know – since Grace disappeared, it's been hard on all of us, alright? NOT JUST YOU. I knew her way longer than you did, and as far as I know, you're not in love with her. And I am. So just... just grow up! I really can't be bothered anymore.

I'm not talking again until you decide to talk. When you feel that you might actually want to talk to people and go out and just generally live, then write to me. We'll talk.

-Alden

She stared down at the letter. It was impossible. It couldn't be.

And yet it made perfect, clear sense.

Bernard shrugged. "I saw how close you were to Reeve and-"

He had killed Scott because she was close to him. Because he knew it would affect her. And if she wasn't close to Scott, then he would just have to kill someone else she cared about.

Grace.

"Grace!" she gasped. Her family – Grace – Scott – everything – and her stomach lurched, tipping upside down, and she had to sprint desperately for the bathroom before the contents of her digestive system emptied itself.

"Ginevra?" Tom called. "What's wrong?" His footsteps came closer, and then he was standing in the bathroom doorway, and she could feel his worried gaze on her.

She had been sick until there was nothing left to get rid of, and now she just lay on the floor, her hot, sweating cheek pressed against the

cold tiles, tears flooding silently down her face and onto the floor, wetting the ground. She wanted to drown in them.

“Grace,” she whispered, her stomach tearing.

“What’s wrong?” Tom asked.

“GRACE!” she sobbed, sitting up. She grabbed hold of the sink to keep her steady as the rest of the world spun. “He – Bernard – no – Scott – because – he – he killed Grace instead!” she finally managed to choke out.

Tom grimaced. He moved closer and knelt beside her, taking her hands gently in his. “Ginevra...” he avoided looking at her. “I don’t know how to say this... but it has to happen. One way or another. And... it was ridiculous, trying to change it. You can change it back, but then-”

“Then what?” Ginny shouted. “Choose? Who do I like more – Grace or Scott? Or Philippa? Or Alden? Or you? Do you I just select you I don’t mind being murdered?” She was crying all over again; falling to pieces. “I don’t want to play God!” she screamed.

Tom looked into her face, his expression soft and tired. He sighed. “You won’t have to.” He bent and kissed her on the forehead, and then stood up. “I’ll see you in a while,” he said quietly, and then walked out of the bathroom.

By the time that she had stopped crying, stopped being sick, dragged herself to her feet and stumbled back into reality, he was already gone.

xxx

Tom was far better at time-travel, she would give him that much. When she had attempted to travel by herself, she had ended up first twenty-odd years further ahead than she was supposed to be, and then a month and a half late. The one time that she knew of him time-travelling was with her, bringing her back from... her... family... and he had got within a week of their preferred time.

Therefore, as she had predicted, she only had a week of living in a desolate, bleak world where Grace was dead and everyone else hated her... and then-

She was eating a take-away (she didn't trust herself not to kill herself with food poisoning in Tom's absence) when the sky lit up stark, burning white, so quick that if she had blinked, she would not have noticed it-

And when everything returned to normal, it was exactly the same, but something had changed.

For one thing, Tom was standing in her living room.

"Tom!" she exclaimed, running to him. Her tears had dried up after nightmares, bad memories and sickness had run amok in her life, and she seemed fine now. Or at least she wanted her husband to believe that, even if she was not completely restored.

She threw her arms around him, breathing in that familiar smell of ink and sandalwood. She had missed him greatly, even though for him she knew that it would have been less than fifteen minutes.

"I returned Dumbledore's wand to his office under the code-word Arianna, so that you could steal it in a year's time," he told her. "What's the date?"

"August the first," she told him. She stepped back and looked up into his face. "Is... what did you..." She couldn't finish any of her sentences. She trailed off, hoping he could finish what she couldn't.

Tom shifted, exhaling a long, heavy breath. "I visited February on the way back. Reeve... he's gone."

She hugged him again, burying her face in his shoulder. It was what she had always expected, but there was still a numb pain at the bottom of her stomach.

No, wait.

That wasn't because of Scott.

"Oh my God," she said, tears welling up in her eyes for no reason.

"What?" Tom looked down at her, worried for her again. "Are you okay?"

She looked up at him unhappily. "My water just broke."

xxx

A/N: And that was the full chapter. I was going to divide it into two chapters, which is what I attempted the first time, but I tried it all together. It's a nice big one, because I'm going to Belgium soon and won't be able to update. Yes, we've all been waiting for this moment. And, in answer to several people, I know it's been getting a little slow, but don't worry, it gets dramatic again. XD You know I love my plot-twists. PLEASE REVIEW.

Xxx

Chapter Thirty-Two: Frankenstein

Tom shifted, exhaling a long, heavy breath. "I visited February on the way back. Reeve... he's gone."

She hugged him again, burying her face in his shoulder. It was what she had always expected, but there was still a numb pain at the bottom of her stomach. She looked up at him unhappily. "My water just broke."

xxx

Everything was rather a blur for Tom. He vaguely remembered swearing a lot, grabbing her coat, ignoring his own coat, pulling her outside of the Apparation wards, Apparating to St. Mungoes'... and then a lot of things happened.

He had to fill out a lot of forms, and tell a few nurses who he was, even though he was sure that they should recognise him and Ginevra by now – for him, being stabbed and cursed; for her, malnutrition, pregnancy checks, check of her internal bleeding to check that she was recovering after their honeymoon – and still there was a long and uninteresting procedure to get done.

"Can I not do this after the baby's born?" he eventually demanded, losing his patience. It had already been at least three hours of questions and forms to fill out. Without waiting for an answer, he stormed away to see Ginevra.

Tom soon found her propped up on a hospital bed, shouting abuse at a frightened-looking nurse: "Get to the bloody point, woman!"

"-but, of course, we need to need to know if you suffer from the few side-effects of these pain-killing spells, and we would need your and your partner's or relative's consent-"

"JUST GIVE ME THE FREAKIN' PAIN-KILLER!" she yelled.

The nurse looked up at Tom for help. "Are you her partner?" she asked.

“Yes, and if I were you I would do as she asked.”

“Thank you!” Ginevra exclaimed, slumping back on the bed. “Bout time you got here,” she complained to him. “What took you so long? I’ve been having bloody contractions for the past three hours!”

“I’m sorry,” he apologised, kissing her forehead. He held her hand as the nurse cast the pain-killing spell, and from then she seemed to be coping with the contractions, only occasionally grunting or groaning.

She was mumbling under her breath, supposedly talking to him, though she couldn’t hear a word that she was saying. He didn’t tell her this. He thought that mumbling was definitely better than shouting. He could hear screams from some of the other rooms. He held her hand. Maybe he was just lucky, and was getting a quiet, painless birth-

“Shit!” Ginevra suddenly gasped loudly.

He tipped his head back, stifling a groan. Brilliant.

The nurse’s eyes widened, and she scurried out of the room, excusing herself with, “I’ll get a doctor!”

“Are you okay?” Tom asked nervously.

“NO!”

“Okay.” He smoothed her hair back from her head. “There, it’ll be okay, right? Just calm down, the doctor will be here in a moment-”

“Make him get here faster!” Ginevra shouted at him.

“I can’t, but don’t worry, he’ll be here soon enough...” Tom looked worriedly towards the door. He was becoming increasingly concerned that she was going to physically beat him. But hopefully she couldn’t move. Or injure people.

Right?

Thankfully, a doctor moved swiftly through the door, snapping on plastic gloves. "How are you doing, Mrs. Riddle?" he asked cheerfully.

"HOW DO YOU THINK?" she roared at him.

"Wonderful." The doctor said something quietly to the nurse and then got to work.

Tom dithered, not sure of what to do. Her head was where the screaming was coming from, but he was fairly certain that standing by her legs wasn't a good idea. "Where should I stand?" he asked the doctor.

"Wherever she wants you to stand," the doctor advised him.

"Ginevra?"

"STAND BY MY HEAD!"

Tom cringed, but obediently moved to stand beside her – just as she screamed.

Holy crap. He wanted to cover his ears and run. He suspected that she would get up, run after him, drag his back by his ankles, and kill him if he tried.

"Breathe, Ginevra, it's okay," he attempted to comfort her. "It's okay-"

"It's not okay!" she yelled at him.

"Alright, then."

"Mrs. Riddle, I need you push as hard as you can – can you do that?" the doctor asked brightly.

"No," she groaned.

“Just try,” the doctor said persuasively, looking her in the eyes very seriously. “Then it’ll all be over more quickly, and you’ll have yourself a happy little baby. Trust me.”

Ginevra moaned. “Fine.”

“Okay, now, on three, Mrs. Riddle. One... two...”

She screamed.

“That was on two, Mrs. Riddle.”

“I don’t care!” she screeched, flailing her arms. She grabbed Tom’s hand, and squeezing with all the force of a metal vice. Jesus. He was fairly sure that if she put all of that strength into pushing the baby out, then it would just about fly across the room.

“Let’s try again. On three. One... two... three!” the doctor shouted. “Push!”

Ginevra’s face turned bright red, and Tom lost all feeling in his hand.

“There we go – once more?”

“NO!” She sank back. “I don’t care. I – GIVE – UP. I don’t want the stupid baby anymore...”

“Well, I do,” Tom said, trying to encourage her-

“THEN WHY DON’T YOU FUCKING GIVE BIRTH TO IT?” she hollered at him, but then her words twisted into a scream of what could only be absolute pain.

Crunch.

“Ah, shit!” he exclaimed, doubling over as agony exploded through his wrist. “Ow, ow, ow-” He could quite clearly see the bones in his hand in the wrong places.

“What’s wrong?” the doctor asked him.

“She broke my hand!” he complained. Ginevra gave him a deadly look, and he immediately fell silent. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

“It better not – ARGH!” She screamed again, this time louder than the others. She was straining so much that her veins stood out in her forehead, and Tom felt the bones in his hand move again. He groaned with pain but didn’t say anything.

“Again, Mrs. Riddle, nearly there!”

Tears were streaming down her face. “Can’t I just stay pregnant forever?” she begged. “Please?”

“No – now push!”

Ginevra gave a short sob before straining again. Tom held onto her with his free, healthy hand – not speaking though, as he had already learnt that saying anything was an excuse to shout at him.

One final, piercing, devastating scream-

The doctor was bent over the end of the hospital bed, and there was a soft gurgling, and crying.

Tom’s mouth fell open slightly. It had actually happened. They actually had a baby.

Ginevra didn’t seem to care at all. “Is it over?” was all she wanted to know, asking wearily, her voice raw and cracked from all the yelling. Tom told her that she could relax, and the only thing she said – not ‘can I see the baby’, not ‘oh I love you’... but she just groaned, “Thank fuck” and slumped backwards in a faint.

Tom pushed the hair away from her sweaty face, smoothing her tears away, and kissed her on the forehead. Then, slowly, yet with his heart going a mile a minute, he turned to see the doctor and what monster he had created.

xxx

A/N: I'm back from Belgium! YAY! It was brilliant, honestly. Yeah, I'm sorry that this chapter is so short, but you got an amazingly long chapter last time. And plus, nothing else worked. I know that it was maybe slightly bizarre having it from Tom's POV, but I thought that it would be really boring and repetitive having it from Ginny's POV and just repeating over and over again: she pushed. It hurt. She screamed, and blah. Also, I tried to make it funnier to make up for all the angsty crap.

Okay, for those who didn't understand what exactly happened at the Weasley's – all three realities were getting mixed up in her head. The alternate reality, where they were all alive; her reality, where she'd seen them all die; and a non-existent reality, which is what should have really happened, meaning Ron and Harry and everyone turned on Tom, and Tom killed everyone. Yeah. Sorry if that was confusing.

Oh, and – YAY! A BABY!

Xxx

Chapter Thirty-Three: August Reasoning

She looked up at him unhappily. "My water just broke."

One final, piercing, devastating scream- The doctor was bent over the end of the hospital bed, and there was a soft gurgling, and crying. Tom pushed the hair away from her sweaty face, smoothing her tears away, and kissed her on the forehead. Then, slowly, yet with his heart going a mile a minute, he turned to see the doctor and what monster he had created.

xxx

Ginny woke up feeling sore.

"Ow..." she groaned, shifting in the hospital bed. She swiped tiredly at her face with her hand. "Remind me never to do that again."

"Not likely."

She jumped, startled. She hadn't realised that Tom was standing next to her. She exhaled her pent-up breath sharply, flopping back onto her pillow. She was too exhausted to do anything. "Hi..." she said faintly.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, moving some of her hair gently behind her ear.

"Tired." She grinned weakly at him; then she frowned. "You don't look too brilliant yourself."

He twitched his shoulders in a small shrug. "I didn't get much sleep."

"What time is it?"

Tom glanced at his watch. "Three in the morning." He looked up at her with a small smile. "She was born four hours ago."

Her eyes widened, and she let out a tiny, involuntary squeal. "She?"

"She," Tom repeated. One eyebrow arched. "Are we going with Evangeline, the world's longest name, them?"

"I don't know!" she exclaimed, bouncing in her seat despite how she ached all over. "Oh, I want to see her!"

"I think you might not be allowed to walk around yet-"

I can't walk? Tears filled her eyes. I can't see my baby?

"-but," he hastily added, seeing that her hormone levels had far from returned to normal; on the contrary, they seemed to have worsened, "a nurse can probably bring her in here."

"Oh, okay, then," Ginny said, satisfied. And yet she kept crying.

"What's wrong?" Tom asked worriedly.

"I don't know," she wept.

He chuckled. "You're ridiculous," he told her, and wrapped her carefully in his arms. He kissed the tip of her nose. "I'll be right back." He let go her, and then disappeared from the room.

Ginny watched him go, and she felt like crying again. She knew that he was only going to get the baby, and that he would be back very swiftly and then everything would be okay... but she felt lonely.

Why does everyone I love leave me, she asked herself miserably, and tears dripped down her pale cheeks.

"Ginevra?"

She looked up, and saw that Tom was back. He was standing in the doorway; he glanced back over his shoulder, and then shifted slightly out of the way, letting a nurse come past him... and in the nurse's arms...

"Oh!" she breathed, her eyes widening. She wriggled in her seat to sit up properly, so to better see.

“Do you want to hold her?” the nurse asked, holding out this tiny bundle.

Ginny nodded, unable to speak. She held out her arms.

The nurse passed her the... the baby. Her baby. “I’ll leave the happy family alone,” the nurse said with a smile, and moved backwards through the door again.

Turning her attention back to the wrapped bundle. She was ... tiny. So tiny that Ginny was scared she was going to break – and, knowing her luck with fragile objects, or people, it was increasingly likely. Tiny, pink, and-

She looked up at Tom. “She’s beautiful,” she whispered.

He moved to stand beside her. “Of course she is,” he said, a smile turning his lips. “She is yours.”

At that moment, the little baby girl twisted in Ginny’s arms, squirming – and then her eyes opened.

Brown, green, gold, silver, a feline yellow, hazel, jade – swirled, spiderwebbed, splashed – all into one colour. The newest member of the Riddle family blinked these eyes sleepily, not really focusing on anything real, just looking.

“Hi, Marianne,” Ginny breathed, cradling her daughter close to her chest.

Tom looked at her curiously. “...I thought you said you hated that name,” he said, looking surprised – but pleased.

I don’t get to call her Marianne? Tears welled up in her eyes again. “Look at her,” she said. “You can’t tell me that you’re looking at an Evangeline face.”

“I don’t have a problem with calling Marianne,” he told her. “It’s what I suggested all along.” He looked down at the infant again.

“...Marianne Molly Riddle.” He didn’t say it as though it was a question, but his dark eyes flashed up to hers for confirmation.

Ginny smiled tearfully. “I like it.” Marianne wriggled limply in her arms again, and Ginny turned to Tom again. “Do you want to hold her?”

He hesitated. “I... I don’t really know how.”

“It’s hardly Arithmancy,” she teased him gently. “Here. Careful-”

But as she leaned forwards to hand little Marianne to him, something strange happened. The two females came within a metre radius of him, and he suddenly dragged in a sharp breath, doubling over, an arm tightening around his stomach.

“Tom?” she asked in alarm. “Tom – are you alright? Tom?” She sat back in bed to give him some space, regarding him with wide, concerned eyes.

There was a moment’s silence, and then he straightened up slowly, all colour drained from his face. “I’m fine,” he grunted, but she noticed that his arm didn’t relax around his thin frame. He glanced at Marianne. “Maybe later,” he mumbled.

She bit her lip. “Is it...?” she trailed off, knowing that he hated his problem being mentioned aloud. Then she remembered something, and she gasped. “Is she...?”

Tom shook his head. “I don’t think so,” he said quietly, his gaze lingering on Marianne. “Or, at least, she has as of yet not shown any inclination towards wanting to kill anyone.”

Ginny’s eyes widened. For a moment she couldn’t speak. Her eyes watered furiously, tears streaming down her cheeks. “She’s... she’s... she’s not...” she couldn’t take in it. “Oh my God.” She bit her lip to try and restrain her watery smile of relief. She couldn’t finish any of her sentences – not in front of Tom, at least. What would she say? ‘She’s perfect’? And Tom wasn’t? ‘She’s normal’? That wasn’t very nice to Tom. ‘She’s not crazy’? She just left her amazement at that, and

screwed her eyes up to try and stop her stupid hormonal crying, but with no affect.

“Don’t cry, she’s fine,” Tom said, wiping tears from Ginny’s face. “It’s okay.”

“I know, I know,” she sobbed. “It’s just...” She looked up at him, her eyes tracing over the paleness of his face, and recalled what had brought on this topic of conversation. “What just happened to you, then?”

“Nothing,” he snapped – far too quickly, she thought, and far too defensively. “Nothing,” he repeated, less viciously, but still firm. “I don’t know. Perhaps it’s just some food poisoning. You know that I’m hardly a brilliant cook. I’m fine.”

She looked over his face with concern, but he was slowly regaining some colour, and his arm loosened around himself. Her eyebrows were still furrowed in a slight frown, but he smiled to reassure her. He bent to kiss her, and smoothed the hair from her face. “Who do you want to tell first?”

xxx

Eleanor Fionn/Grace Hartwin/Alden Philips/Luke Glasscoe/Elizabeth Menzies/Louise Armstrong/Antonia Durrell/Jack Swithin,

Mr. Tom M. Riddle and Mrs. Ginevra A. Riddle are celebrating the birth of Marianne Molly Riddle on the first of August, 1961, at 11:03pm. A personal note from the parents is included:

I HAVE A BABY! Ohmigod, she’s lovely, I can’t wait for you to see her.
– Mrs. Ginevra A. Riddle

You were right, Fionn. As usual. – Mr. Tom M. Riddle

xxx

It was a week before Ginny was allowed to leave the hospital with Marianne, and even then she was given a month and a half of

maternity leave – paid maternity leave. It was like heaven on earth. She was being paid for doing bugger all, she had a baby who, though small, had survived the night, and a husband who wasn't turning emo on the baby.

All the same, she thought she would go insane from the lack of company, because Tom was still at work, and so were all her friends. Because of this, she was delighted to have six people tumble through her door in a tangle of limbs, shouting, "Surprise" – "ow!" – "That was my face, stupid!" – "SURPRISE, Ginny!"

She bolt upright, her eyes lighting up. "What are you doing here?" She got to her feet and hurried towards them, still waddling slightly due to the fact that her bloated stomach had not returned to normal yet. "Sshh, quiet, she's asleep – sshh. Are you okay?"

Grace dragged herself to her feet, blinking in shock. "Well, that was a dramatic entrance," she noted interestedly, and then ran forwards, shrieking, "Ginny!"

"I said quiet, Grace!" Ginny shushed her, but allowed herself to be picked up and hugged as though she was the baby. "You can put me down now, really."

She looked over at the rest of the chaos, which was made up of Luke, who seemed strangely pleased with himself; a rather bewildered Louise, being helped up by Will Gallantree; Beth Menzies straightening her skirt, and... Alden was face-down on the floor, not moving very much.

"Alden?" She frowned. "Are you okay?"

"No," he groaned. He tried to sit up, but slumped down again. "Oh God..." he mumbled into the floor.

"I think he got hit in the crotch," Beth stated, seeming vaguely amused by this.

Ginny looked again at Luke's smug expression, and she suspected it had not been an accident. Oh well. With Luke, Alden and Grace all

present, it was bound to be awkward, and it would no go without a few childish squabbles. She sighed.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be fine,” Luke said, giving Alden a disdainful glance.

“Can we see the baby? Oh, please, oh, please?” Grace asked, hopping from one foot to the other.

“Well...” Ginny hesitated. “She’s asleep, but... okay.” She lead them through to her and Tom’s bedroom, quickly casting a non-verbal spell on it as she went in to tidy up the general clutter strewn across the floor, and another to make the bed, if anyone wanted to sit on it. She stood in front of the cot that Beth and Louise had given her, and her expression immediately softened.

“Aww,” Grace cooed.

“She’s cute,” Beth had to admit.

Louise didn’t speak, but her eyes were warm, and Will was smiling. Alden hadn’t come into the room yet from where he had collapsed on the floor.

“How old is she again?” Luke asked.

“Ten days.”

“Aww,” Grace cooed for the second time.

Alden staggered into the room, appearing by the agonised look on his face as though he’d been attacked by a vicious mob. He came to stand beside Beth, and exhaled heavily. “She looks like you,” he commented, his tired eyes flickering over her baby.

“Really?” Ginny wanted to squeal, but she was whispering, and she didn’t want to wake up Marianne. She settled for hugging herself instead, and swinging her body from side to side. “Yay.”

Alden looked up at her then. “How’s R- Tom?” he asked cautiously.

“What d’you mean?” She was confused.

“Well, I remember he wasn’t exactly... overjoyed, initially,” Alden said, choosing his words carefully. “Is he alright?”

“Oh, yeah,” she exclaimed, flushing red at the memory of the rather embarrassing public arguments they’d had in the beginning. “He’s fine. He’s not very well at the moment, but he’s okay.”

Beth snorted.

“What?” Ginny asked, slight irritation rising up at the derisiveness that her closest friend from the Daily Prophet often showed at the mention of Tom.

“Don’t take any of that crap,” Beth said. “Please. It’s just the usual case of man-flu because he actually has to do something now.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re the one who’s going to have to take care of her all the time – I mean, he hasn’t got maternity leave, has he?”

Ginny shifted. “That’s not fair,” she said crossly. “He does loads. He...” She felt a bit humiliated now. “He’s normally the one who has to get up all the time in the middle of the night.” Red was flooding her face. She must sound like such a bad parent. “Because he’s a light sleeper. And I’m, er, not.”

“Oh, really,” said Beth.

“Hey, you could not being such a bitch, you know,” Luke suddenly said, his voice more of a hiss than a whisper.

Beth – easily offended – stared. Her mouth dropped open. “Excuse me?”

“Having a go at Riddle for no reason-”

“I have a reason, thank you very much,” Beth retorted.

“Go on, then.”

“Because I happen to have first-hand evidence that men are shit. Full-stop.” Beth was scarlet with anger. “Especially men like you.”

“How can you say that within barely twenty minutes of meeting me?” Luke snapped. Ginny tried to shush him, concerned for the welfare of sleeping Marianne.

“Firstly – I prove my point, you hypocrite. How dare you call me a bitch within barely twenty minutes of meeting me?” Beth snarled. “And secondly, I don’t need to know you. I don’t want to know you. I’ve heard enough about you from Ginny.”

Ginny stiffened, uncomfortable. This wasn’t going well.

“What you have heard?” Luke asked quietly.

“I’ve heard enough,” Beth told him. “About what you did to her best friend.”

Grace flinched, but it was Alden who reacted. “What the hell did you do to her?” he ground out, stepping in front of Grace, his angry face inches from Luke’s.

“Nothing,” Luke said furiously.

Alden, who had clearly decided that he didn’t like this answer, nor did he believe it, sunk his fist deep into Luke’s stomach.

“Stop it!” Grace cried, and Marianne stirred at the loud noise.

“You-” Luke grabbed Alden by the front of his shirt, and looked like he was perfectly prepared to pin him to the wall and strangle him to death, had Will not dived in and tried to wrestle them apart. “I can’t believe your nerve, saying that I’ve done something when you were the one who stole her from me-”

“I apologise if she prefers a real man to one who tries to run away when anything gets mildly difficult for you-”

“Thank you,” Beth declared. “I prove my point.”

“Stay out of this,” Alden snarled at her, and Beth kicked him in the leg for that. “OW! I SAID, STAY OUT”

“OUT!” Ginny suddenly screamed. “ALL of you!”

Everyone turned to stare at her, who was by now holding Marianne, who was not only awake but crying her eyes out.

Luke looked for a second as though he was going to say something, but he wasn't that unreasonable; he let go of Alden and stormed out of the bedroom. Will followed, probably to make sure that Luke was suitably restrained, and Louise followed her boyfriend. Alden pushed through the door after them.

“I hate to say I told you so-”

“Beth. Shut up.”

The older woman slunk away, leaving just Grace, Ginny and Marianne together. The redhead looked at her best friend. “Oh, dear,” she said, seeing that there were tears in Grace's eyes as well. “Why do you cause so much trouble?”

“Not on purpose,” Grace sniffed.

Ginny grimaced. “I would give you a hug but I'm a bit occupied, so...” She shrugged. “Imaginary hug...”

“Imaginary hug,” Grace replied sadly, and then left the room.

Ginny moved through to the living room. “Right, all of you – no, Luke, you sit between Will and Louise. God, it's like being a nursery teacher. Alden, shut up. Beth, don't even start. Look, I'm really sorry, but I cannot be dealing with all of you acting like children when I've got my own to take care of. Can you either settle it somewhere else, or just... I don't know. But I can't cope right now.” She sighed, hugging Marianne to her, who was by now only snuffling, as the loud shouting had now stopped. “I'll see you all as soon as I can.”

They took the hint, and one by one, trailed away with feeble 'goodbye's and 'see you's left in their wake.

"It's just me and you, then," Ginny finally said to Marianne, closing the door behind them. "Merlin. D'you think they're ever going to sort themselves out?"

Marianne's hazel eyes blinked slowly, sleepily, once, and then closed. She squirmed slightly in sleep, and then was still.

Ginny sighed. "Me neither."

xxx

A/N: Sorry for so much waiting. My Internet's being really annoying. Also – how amazing is this – one of my friend's who reads my fics is making a trailer on Youtube! I've seen the start of it and it's so good! I'll post the link when it's done. (: Please review!

Xxx

Chapter Thirty-Four: Skin and Scales

But as she leaned forwards to hand little Marianne to him, something strange happened. The two females came within a metre radius of him, and he suddenly dragged in a sharp breath, doubling over, an arm tightening around his stomach.

“It’s just me and you, then,” Ginny finally said to Marianne, closing the door behind them. “Merlin. D’you think they’re ever going to sort themselves out?” Marianne’s hazel eyes blinked slowly, sleepily, once, and then closed. She squirmed slightly in sleep, and then was still. Ginny sighed. “Me neither.”

xxx

Unusual thing number one, Ginny noted as she woke up, was that Marianne was crying. Of course, Marianne cried a lot, but it never usually woke Ginny – something that she was ashamed of, but that was true.

Unusual thing number two, she realised, was that Tom was still asleep. That would explain why Marianne had woken her up. She wasn’t annoyed; on the contrary, she was happy, because she always felt guilty at the fact that Tom always took care of Marianne in the night.

She climbed out of bed, careful not to stir Tom... not that it mattered, because he was psychic and always woke up anyway if she so much as blinked an awake eyelid.

Unusual thing number three was that he didn’t stir.

Oh well. Ginny crossed the room to her unhappy child, picked her up, and cradled her carefully to her chest. “It’s okay,” she whispered, still wary of waking Tom up. “Don’t cry.”

She carried Marianne through to the living room, away from where any noise might wake her husband. She fed and changed Marianne (shock horror disaster, that had been a nightmare the first few days around), fed herself (managing to burn her cereal... she wasn’t even

sure how that had happened. Or if it was even possible. Well, it was now), and dressed – doing all of this one-handed, for holding Marianne. This resulted in her clothes being rather lopsided, with the majority of her buttons in the wrong button-holes and so on.

“This is ridiculous,” she muttered to herself. “I can barely take care of myself with both hands, let alone with one hand.”

She glanced at the clock on the wall. Ten to eight. Tom liked having strict schedules, and his schedule was that he left at eight. That didn’t give him much time. But then again, his schedule was also that he woke up at six-thirty.

“Good girl,” Ginny said, kissing Marianne’s sleepy face, and set her back in her cot.

Quiet, quiet, considerate, don’t wake him up too cruelly-

THUMP. She fell over a pile of washed clothes that she had yet to put away, and landed on the bedside table, knocking the lamp sideways, which she lunged to catch, thus letting go of the table supporting her, and collapsing to the ground, the lamp still clutched in her arms.

It’s okay. You saved the lamp. You didn’t break the bedside table. He didn’t hear that. He’s still asleep...

Ginny restored the lamp to its original place, stood up, and moved to the bed, sitting carefully beside where Tom was hidden under the covers.

“Tom...” she said softly, shaking his shoulder beneath the blankets. “Tom.... Wakey-wakey...”

Slowly, his eyes cracked open, bleary and exhausted. There were heavy dark circles under his eyelids, contrasting with the stark, unhealthy paleness of his face. “Where’zhe fire?” he said, his words mashing together into nonsense.

“Morning, sunshine,” she said, grinning at him.

"You'r up early," he mumbled.

"No, you just overslept a little," she corrected gently.

"ow little?" He peered at the clock, blinking to clear his sight; his eyes then widened. "Crap." He pushed back the blanket slightly, as though to get up – and then suddenly he curled up, crushing the side of his face into his pillow, squeezing his eyes closed. One hand blindly groped for the blankets.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked, confused.

"Cold," he hissed, mostly to himself, through his teeth, and he balled up tighter.

Ginny frowned. Most of time she was the one who was too cold. "Tom," she said worriedly, "are you okay?" She reached towards his face, brushing her fingers lightly across the skin – and it was like she had fire. "Oh my God," she exclaimed. Cold? She had felt colder furnaces than him.

Tom didn't speak, but he groaned at her touch.

"You need to stay at home," she told him. "Seriously. You're boiling." She moved her hand to rest over his heart, his bare skin blazing beneath her fingers, and felt that his pulse was fast, hectic. "You're staying here."

"No," he muttered, obstinate. "Havete go work."

"You have to stay here," Ginny said firmly. "You're not well – I don't want you to kill yourself or something in the bookshop."

He sat up, his chest heaving with the exertion, and then stumbled away, disregarding her annoyed protests.

She huffed. I suppose, if he's well enough to be this stubborn, then he's probably well enough to go to work.

xxx

Ginny had nothing to do at home. Marianne was asleep; Tom was at work... she was quite bored. Since her maternity leave had begun, she'd read all of the neglected books that Grace and Alden had given her. She'd read a few of them twice. One of them, her favourite – a 'modern' (meaning late fifties') twist on the fairytale of a pretty girl falling in love with a monster – she'd read four times. She had nothing to do, and she found herself thinking.

What about Tom's family?

He didn't like talking about it, but she knew bits and pieces of his life before Hogwarts, and before he was born. She knew that his mother had died soon after he was born, leaving him in an orphanage. She knew that his father had abandoned him before he had been born, and returned to another woman. She knew that his father and his paternal grandparents were dead, and, from the bitter comments, she suspected that he'd killed them. Being honest, she didn't blame him. She also knew that his maternal grandfather was called Marvolo, and that he had an uncle named Morfin – the second of the two Slytherin twins in the earlier generation.

She chewed her lower lip. She doubted that Tom would be exactly ecstatic if she went and talked to his uncle without asking him first. Still, he wouldn't let her go if she told him – Morfin was the immoral of the twins.

He doesn't have to know...

For working at home, Ginny had a thick tome of the WIZARDING Yellow Pages. She hurried to retrieve it now, but then stopped in her tracks as she realised that it would not have the address of Muggles in it. She could not search for Morfin in the WIZARDING Yellow Pages, as she did not know his last name.

She slipped out of the front door and down the hallway to next door. As it was a Muggle apartment block, some Muggle living here had to have the Yellow Pages.

KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK.

Ginny stood back and waited impatiently for someone to answer the door, twisting a strand of her hair between her fingers. The door eventually swung open, and an elderly woman peeked out.

"Hello," Ginny said, smiling. "I'm Ginny Riddle; I live next door. I was just wondering if you had a copy of the Yellow Pages on you? I can't find mine."

"You live next door, do you?" the woman enquired suspiciously.

"Yeah." Ginny's smile faltered.

"You make a lot of noise in there," said the woman crossly. "I've half a mind not to give you the Yellow Pages. God knows what you get up to in there. Shouting and screaming and all sorts."

Ginny shifted. She just hoped that the woman hadn't heard the gunshots when Bernard had visited; she could have called the police. "I'm sorry. We'll try and keep it down."

"You better," the woman huffed. "Next time I hear any trouble, I'm calling the police." She eyed Ginny, made a 'humph' noise upon seeing that the redhead did not intend to cause any disarray on her doorstep, and then disappeared. She returned a moment later with a fat gold book. "You use it here."

"Okay, thank you." Ginny didn't really like this bossy, irritable neighbour, but she flipped through the book, looking for Mrs. Cole – a name that Tom had once let slip as the name of the woman who owned the orphanage where he had lived.

Coin... Coil... Colan... Colby... Colder... Cole... Cole!

Her finger traced down to find a Mrs. Cole that owned an orphanage. It was in a small town in Scotland called Fellerdand, which she then looked up in the map at the back of the book, and found it was near the sea.

“Thank you,” said Ginny, smiling as gratefully as she could at the grumpy woman, and handed back the Yellow Pages. “Have a nice day.” She then hurried back to her own apartment, and grabbed some Floo powder.

xxx

It was a square building, grim and grey in appearance. There was a bare courtyard in front of it, which looked as though it had not had any grass in a long time. The ground was uneven, worn away with footprints of small children. Ginny hitched Marianne higher on her hip and marched bravely to the front door, knocking on the wood as loudly as she could with one hand and a baby.

A moment passed, with a lot of shrieking and clattering coming from inside, and then a sharp-eyed but weary-looking woman opened the door and looked out. She huffed. “I’ll get the application forms,” she said. “Come in, come in.”

“What?” Ginny stepped through the doorway, confused.

“You’re leaving it here, aren’t you?” the woman asked, nodding at Marianne. She too seemed rather puzzled now.

“No,” Ginny exclaimed, raising her voice slightly more than was probably necessary. She held her daughter tightly. “No,” she repeated, softer this time. “I just want to ask some questions. Are you Mrs. Cole?”

“That I am,” said the woman, closing the door behind Ginny. “And I’m terribly sorry about what I said, Mrs...”

“Riddle.”

The redhead watched with a smile as realisation dawned on Mrs. Cole, then bewilderment, and then disbelief.

“Riddle?” Mrs. Cole echoed.

“Maiden name Peregrine,” Ginny said, just to make it even more obvious.

Mrs. Cole frowned. “You married our Tom?” She raised her eyebrows. “Well, whatever you like, I suppose.” She then looked at Marianne. “Oh, and is this...?”

“Yeah, this is Marianne Riddle.” Ginny decided that they were getting off-topic. “Could I ask you some questions, please, about Tom? I want to get in contact with his family, as a surprise for him,” she lied quickly. “Do you know where I could find them?”

Together they moved through to a small tidy office. Mrs. Cole sat behind a desk, and Ginny on a tiny hard-backed chair in front of her. She felt as though she was at primary school again, in trouble with the headmistress for painting Henry Worth yellow.

“I don’t know how much you already know,” Mrs. Cole started, absent-mindedly tidying some papers, “but Tom was born here on the twenty-sixth of April, right, some – oh, I don’t remember – maybe twenty years ago. Merope Gaunt, his mother was called. Bedraggled, exhausted-looking woman, positively smashed through the door, said she needed help. She didn’t really seem to like the look of us, but as she was in the middle of a painful birth procedure, she didn’t have much of a choice, did she?”

Mrs. Cole chuckled without much humour, and grabbed a mug of what looked to be stone-cold tea, taking a great gulp from it and then setting it back down on the desktop, smacking her lips.

“After he was born, she said – and I remember her exact words, because they were so unusual – ‘please, name them... name them... Tom, for his father... and Marvolo, for my father... Riddle. That’s the last name. Riddle. You understand?’ And she seemed very set on saying them, like there was more than one. Deluded, she was. And then, suddenly, all the strength was draining from her so quickly, like someone had pulled a plug. Fevered – hot first, then cold, then coughing like her lungs were on fire... then she died. Brain haemorrhage, or something like that. I don’t know exactly.”

Ginny stared blankly ahead. Fevered? Hot, then cold? But... no. No, surely not. She shook herself, and kissed Marianne's wrinkled little forehead to calm herself.

"What did you say the mother's name was?" she asked.

"Merope Gaunt. Unusual name, but so is Marvolo, so maybe her whole family was a bit loopy." Mrs. Cole looked anxiously at Ginny, suddenly realising that she was insulting her husband, but then seemed to decide that she didn't care.

"Thank you," said Ginny, standing. Marianne shifted in her arms at the moment, snorting a little as she snored. "And thanks for your time, as well."

She left the orphanage quickly, trying to banish the idea that had now been planted in her brain, trying to leave it behind with the dreary grey building.

Tom is not going to die.

xxx

Ginny left Marianne with an ecstatic Eleanor Fionn the next time that she went out on a journey across the United Kingdom. She had discovered that the Gaunts hailed from a town called Little Hangleton, in Scotland, and as she recalled that Tom's uncle, Morfin, was the dangerous twin, she didn't dare to bring her daughter with her. She could defend herself – maybe – but she wasn't even going to let Marianne anywhere near someone crazy.

She flinched. Crazy. Bad use of the word. She felt guilty about Tom.

In Little Hangleton, she found that she didn't know at all where the Gaunts lived; she went into a nearby pub and asked.

"The Gaunts?" asked a pretty blonde waitress, incredulous. "Whatever do you want them for?"

“Insane, the lot of ‘em,” muttered a half-drunk man at the bar.

“Well,” Ginny lifted her chin, “I want to see them. Where do they live?”

“A mile outside Little Hangleton,” the waitress said, still awed and quite disdainful of anyone who was associated with what she clearly thought was scum. “Down a little dirt road just past the sign pointing here. Straight on down the hill a while until you get to the cottage.”

“Thanks.”

Ginny set off immediately, walking, as, firstly, she didn’t know where she was going, and, secondly, it seemed to be ridiculous to Apparate everywhere. She was getting so lazy. At school, she was on the Quidditch team, and she had to walk everywhere. Now, the furthest she ever had to move was from her desk to Angeline’s office.

Though it was only a mile, it felt a lot further, and she felt blisters raising on her heels and toes as she eventually stumbled down the narrow road next to the road sign directing her back towards Little Hangleton.

And then:

“Ew.” Ginny couldn’t help but frown at the sight of the run-down cottage squashed uncomfortably between several large, dark trees. Descendants of Slytherin? They didn’t really live very luxuriously... frankly, she had seen richer hoboos.

It was tiny, shabby, and broken. She could see the roof rafters through the holes in the mismatched shingles that parted for a partly shattered chimney, blackened by soot. There only seemed to be one small window, and it was smeared so thick with dirt and moss that she couldn’t believe that anyone could see through it. And, nailed to the front door, were several decapitated snakes, all decomposed so thoroughly that they were little more than skin and scales.

Altogether, a charming sort of hovel.

Ginny could catch a glimpse of a tattered path weaving towards it, though it was thick with plant-life, and she slowly picked her way through the waist-high nettles.

“Ow,” she was muttering, hopping on one foot, as she finally reached the door. She lifted her ankle for inspection, feeling a throbbing pink nettle-rash brewing, and stumbled against the front door, banging it loudly.

And then she remembered what was happening.

Meaning, that she was leaning on the door of the Gaunt cottage, where Morfin Gaunt lived.

She tried to calm herself. Maybe he wasn't a raving psychopath. Maybe he was a perfectly nice man... who liked to cut the heads off snakes. And maybe people.

Stop that, she scolded herself. She drew in a deep breath, standing up straight, and lifted her hand to knock on the door-

But it was already open.

Oxygen freezing in her lungs, Ginny stepped cautiously over the threshold.

It was inordinately dark and damp in the cottage; it had a musty feeling to it, like something had burnt a long time ago. She glanced around, and her eyes fell on the stooped, hunch-backed man staring at her from a distance.

“Hello,” she said nervously. She lifted her hand in a little wave.

“Who are you?” the man growled in what she recognised as Parseltongue. A knife glinted at his side in the shallow flickers of light coming through the doorway. “Filthy Muggle daring to come to the noble house of Gaunt, disgusting-”

“I'm not a Muggle,” Ginny cut in quickly, in the same language. She pointed at her mouth. “See?” She was relieved that he had at least

given her a chance instead of just leaping on her, but she was still tense with anticipation. "Are you Morfin Gaunt?"

"I am. What do you want?" the man demanded, stepping a little closer.

Now in the light, Ginny saw him clearer. He was hunched painfully, and his pale eyes stared in opposite directions, his pale face caked in mud and grease. His clothes hung from his thin body in rags. He looked frail enough to fall in the breeze, but Ginny could see wiry muscles bulging under the stretched, yellowed skin, and reminded herself that he had a knife.

"Er. Well. The thing is, I..." She dithered, unsure of where to start. "Did you know that you have a nephew?" she asked cheerfully.

His eyes narrowed. "Nephew?" He frowned, trying to understand – and then realisation dawned on him. "Merope, my sister, that filthy Muggle-lover, she ran off with that Riddle, didn't she? Dirty whore, knew she'd ruin us all, wish she'd died, spoiled our blood with Muggles-" he ranted.

"No!" Ginny interrupted him again. She held up a hand to calm him down. "Not a Muggle," she lied. "A pureblood. She left Riddle, and went to London. She met a pureblood – a – Malfoy. And she married him. And had a son. His name is... Tom Malfoy," she improvised.

"A Malfoy." Morfin seemed quite pleased with this. "Good Slytherin. Good, pure Slytherin. Our line can go on. Forever."

"And I married your nephew," she added.

His eyes snapped up to her, narrowed to slits. "You're a pureblood, yes?" he checked again, pointing the knife at her throat.

"Yes," Ginny hurried out, breathless. "And... your great-niece – your nephew's daughter – is also a pureblood," she told him, smiling nervously. "Marianne... Malfoy." She didn't want to ask him now if he wanted to see Marianne – she didn't dare. However, she wanted him to know that she existed.

“Pureblood, good, good.” He stuck his knife into the wall and shuffled away, muttering to himself.

To say that Ginny was slightly surprised. From what she’d had from Tom’s alter-ego, being blunt, she’d expected an absolute lunatic, chasing her around the room with his wand and a hack-saw, trying to rip her face off. Morfin, though violently defensive of his family’s blood line, seemed decent. It didn’t make any sense.

“Merope?” he suddenly asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Merope,” Morfin repeated. “Gaunt. My sister. My blood. She’s –no. No, she’s dead, yes, of course. Dead.”

Ginny frowned. “Yes – how do you know?”

“Of course she’s dead, of course. She has children,” he explained, mostly to himself. “She has to be dead.”

Her blood ran cold. “What?”

“You see what she does to those Muggles. Nasty, nasty.” Morfin shook his head. The last few strands of stringy, greasy brown hair slicked against his forehead. “Got what they deserved, but got trouble for us. No good, Merope. Always causing trouble when they find those Mudbloods like that, all ruined. Nasty, nasty. Of course she’s dead.”

“I don’t understand,” Ginny said. “Why did Merope die?”

“Don’t know. Nasty Eugene died when Merope was born. Nasty Merope died when Malfoy born.” Morfin shook his head again. “Nasty, nasty, shame, shame.”

Ginny seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. She remembered what Mrs. Cole had said to her at the orphanage about how Merope Gaunt had died: “Deluded, she was. And then, suddenly, all the strength was draining from her so quickly, like someone had pulled a

plug. Fevered – hot first, then cold, then coughing like her lungs were on fire... then she died. Brain haemorrhage, or something like that.” And she recalled how ill Tom was at the moment.

She thanked Morfin for his time, though by then he was already muttering and stumbling and stabbing the wall with his knife; she staggered quickly from the cottage and disappeared, leaving behind the thoughts of what could be.

Thoughts of what was soon to come.

Chapter Thirty-Five: A Baker's Dozen

“Don’t know. Nasty Eugene died when Merope was born. Nasty Merope died when Malfoy born.” Morfin shook his head again. “Nasty, nasty, shame, shame.”

Ginny seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. She remembered what Mrs. Cole had said to her at the orphanage about how Merope Gaunt had died: “Deluded, she was. And then, suddenly, all the strength was draining from her so quickly, like someone had pulled a plug. Fevered – hot first, then cold, then coughing like her lungs were on fire... then she died. Brain haemorrhage, or something like that.” And she recalled how ill Tom was at the moment.

xxx

A large duck waddled underneath Ginny’s eyelids, quacking happily. It came towards her, sat on its fluffy bottom, and stared at her. It tilted its head – and then coughs ripped through the duck, through the air, through the silence-

She cracked her eyes open, bleary and confused. It was dark in the bedroom, and she couldn’t see anything, but there was the silhouette of Tom beside her, sitting up, and shaking with coughs that seemed threatening to tear him apart. There was a whimper from the other side of the bedroom; his noise had woken Marianne.

Still only half-awake, Ginny twisted and stretched, kneading her eyes with her knuckles. “Are you okay?” she asked, reaching a hand out for her husband, but he moved away from her outstretched fingers and nodded hastily.

Seeing that she was going to get no more of a response from him, stubborn as ever, she rolled out of bed and stumbled blindly to Marianne, whose sad cries were getting louder with positive correlation to the strength of Tom’s coughs. As she bent to pick up her daughter, Tom brushed past her to the bathroom, still spluttering.

“Sshh,” Ginny murmured. “Quiet... good girl, it’s okay. Daddy’s just hacking up his lungs.” Holding Marianne to her shoulder, she glanced

over at 'daddy' and saw him bent almost double, gripping the sides of the sink tightly for support. The coughs seemed agonising now, even for her. Now quite concerned, she set Marianne back in her cot, tucking her gently under her little baby blanket, and moved through to Tom to check that he was okay.

By the time she reached him, he had stopped coughing, though he was breathing heavily, raspy, as though the sides of his throat were made of sandpaper.

"Tom?" she asked worriedly, resting a hand lightly on his bare shoulder, peering around to look at him.

Her breath caught.

He was washing blood down the sink.

He caught her staring and his jaw tightened. "It's nothing," he muttered, drying his hands.

"Nothing?" she repeated. "Nothing?" She exhaled angrily. "You listen to me – coughing up blood is not nothing, alright? That's – that's not good, you know! You're – why didn't you tell me you were this ill, I would have-"

"I'm not ill," he ground out from between his teeth. His statement was a complete contrast to the stark paleness of his skin, the purple shadows under his eyes almost black.

She laughed at that, a high, humourless laugh. "Oh, is this normal for you, then? Because you should probably see a doctor about that, they'd probably be delighted to find an amazing subhuman species which could-"

"I'm not subhuman, either," he snarled, and she realised that, for him, that had been the wrong choice of words.

"You could stop biting my head off, considering that I'm only worried about you – I'm sorry for caring!" she snapped. She turned on her heel and walked away from him, back into the bedroom. Her heart

was pounding. She hadn't realised just how sick he was. She had believed that maybe it was all a big coincidence; maybe he had a cold at a bad time; maybe he was going to be fine. But this illness, this disease, if it was that, was progressing too fast for anything normal...

"And then, suddenly, all the strength was draining from her so quickly, like someone had pulled a plug. Fevered – hot first, then cold, then coughing like her lungs were on fire... then she died. Brain haemorrhage, or something like that. I don't know exactly."

It was all coming true. One by one. Weak. Then a fever. Then the cough.

And then death.

She only understood that she was shaking when she sat down on the bed – the sheets began quivering in time with her own trembling. She drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them tight, fighting back tears. She couldn't do this alone. She didn't want to.

A long, shaky breath was drawn in her past her lips, and she was so close to breaking down, tears biting her eyelashes. She clung to her knees like a life-ring, keeping her afloat.

Tom came back into the room, the side of the bed sinking with his weight as he sat down, and for a moment he was silent. Then he looked across at her. "I didn't mean to shout at you," he said quietly. "I apologise."

Ginny didn't answer. She didn't trust herself to. Her voice would give away the hurricane inside her. A tear spilled silently down her cheek, and another.

"Ginevra?" He looked intently at her through the darkness. "...Are you crying?"

"No," she choked out.

He reached for her, his arms easily long enough, and he pulled her across to him, holding her tight to him, kissing her hair. "It's fine," he said softly, but there was still the raw scratch of his cough in his voice, and her tears continued to stream.

"Don't die," she burst out, wrapping her arms around him, as though if he held onto him then he couldn't go.

"What?" he said, alarmed.

"Don't – please – I can't-" She buried her face in his shoulder, trembling.

"I'm not going to," he said, a mixture of bemusement and concern in his tone. "You don't have to worry about me."

"Promise." She sat back and stared at him, her eyes wide. "Promise me. And make me actually believe you."

He sighed. "What would be the point in-"

Ginny's voice cracked. "Please," she whispered.

His head bowed in the shadows. "I won't die," he said, and, for all of his bravado and this-is-stupid talk, his voice was strangely subdued. "Is that enough?"

She took his face in her hands and lifted it to make his eyes meet hers. "Look at me."

"Ginevra, this is ridiculous."

"Promise."

"Ginevra Aiobbheann Molly Peregrine Weasley Riddle, I promise you that I am not going to die for at least another sixty years," he said firmly, sincere despite the mockery of her many names. He stayed quiet for a moment, just looking at her, weaving a hand into her sleep-tousled hair, and, then, butterfly-soft on her lips, kissed her.

xxx

“Are you excited, eh?” Ginny cooed to Marianne. “Big day out! It’s going to be fun!”

She and her daughter – Tom had work conference to take in the place of Mr. Flourish; work which he still insisted on attending despite his slow demise – were going out for the day with Beth, Louise and Will Gallantree. They were all meeting in The Leaky Cauldron at twelve-thirty, and though it was now twelve-forty-five, Ginny, Marianne and Beth were the only ones who had arrived.

They had sat down at a table with Butterbeer to occupy themselves while they waited and were chatting amiably – mostly about Marianne, who was now a month and a half old, and still growing. She now had hair, which was black and faintly wavy. She had also reached the stage of liking to hold onto people’s thumbs and not letting go.

“How long do you think Marianne will have to hang on this time before Louise panics?” Ginny joked, grinning over her glass.

“Who exactly is coming?” Beth asked suddenly.

“Er.” Okay, ignore me completely. “You and me – obviously. And Louise and Will.”

“Oh.” Beth’s face darkened a shade.

Ginny set down her Butterbeer. “Why do you hate everyone’s boyfriends so much?” she challenged. “I mean, before I married Tom, it was always – oh, he’s an idiot, he’s stupid, it’ll never work out, blah-blah-blah. And it has worked out, thank you very much. And even after I’ve married him, you’re still blaming him for everything-”

“Okay,” said Beth, and her voice was definitely icier than it had been a moment beforehand, “I’ll admit that it’s working – now. But I work in the Prophet, remember, and I know that it hasn’t been easy getting here. He was arrested on suspicion of mass murder, proven guilty, and imprisoned. You somehow got him out. After that, you were like a celebrity couple... but then you disappeared. And he turned during a

Quidditch game, asking you to marry him, and apologising for breaking your heart... I also know that your pregnancy was accident. I know that he was furious. And I know that you were hospitalised during your honeymoon.”

“That had nothing to with him,” Ginny said, her blood running cold at the very thought of Bernard.

“What more proof do I need that it’s not going to work?” Beth drank deeply from her Butterbeer, her stone-grey eyes fixed on Ginny over the rim of her glass.

“Whatever, Menzies. Just leave Louise and Will out of this. She’s so painfully shy that I never thought this was actually going to happen. And now that it has, I refuse to let you screw it up for her. It’s completely unfair.”

“Unfair?” Beth muttered. “It’s perfectly fair. I have my reasons.”

“Go on, then.”

Beth’s gaze flashed back up to her friend’s face, even colder now. “I just told you,” she said stiffly.

“No, you didn’t. There’s more. I know there is.” Ginny paused, and tried to install some sympathy into her tone. “No-one is here yet, and I’m not going to tell anyone.”

Silence.

“...Fine. Fine.” Beth slammed her glass down onto the table, glaring. “I don’t know about you, but I didn’t have to world’s best father. He never spoke to me, but I suppose I was the lucky one. He left my brother disabled. We decided it was kinder to let him go. My mother was barely strong enough to stand it, but what could she do? For some idiot reason, she actually loved him. And every night, when she came to me after whatever my father had put her through, she always said the same thing. ‘Don’t worry, Lizzie,’ it was. ‘They’re not all like this. Don’t let your father discourage you from love. It’s a beautiful

thing'. She died of internal bleeding, but I was still fool enough to believe her."

She said these last words with a vehemence that surprised Ginny, though the redhead probably should have expected it.

"At Hogwarts, in my final year," she continued darkly, "I met someone. I'd been too scared to be with anyone until him, but I found courage in him." She swallowed. "Love, even." She stared at the table, her eyes narrowed. "The year after we left school, he asked me to marry him. I did. I moved in. I was only eighteen. And he was everything my father had been and more."

Ginny suddenly found her eyes attracted to the thin pink scar cutting through the skin near Beth's hairline. She suppressed a shiver. All of her annoyance and fierce loyalty for Louise had drained away, and been replaced with a stinging guilt.

"I'm sorry," she said awkwardly, shifting in her seat.

"Yeah, well." Beth lifted her glass and drained it. "So am I."

An uncomfortable silence ensued, but, thankfully, Will and Louise showed up shortly. They both looked slightly flushed; Ginny suspected that either they had to run here, or that they had become side-tracked somewhere along the way.

"Hi, Louise," said Ginny cheerfully, hugging the blonde tightly. Louise mumbled something that could have been a hello, and squirmed as though she didn't really appreciate the close-contact. She probably didn't. Ginny then proceeded to hug Will, quite pointedly glancing at Beth before she did so.

Ignoring Ginny's attempt at equalising the friendship of Louise and Will, Beth greeted them. "Hey, Louise," she smiled. "...Gallantree."

"Beth," said Will good-naturedly, who was by now quite used to her anti-social behaviour.

“Hello, Marianne,” Louise said quietly, ducking over the little green pram. Everyone found it strange how much more talkative she was with the baby than with people her own age. “Do you remember me?”

Ginny felt that it was necessary to point out that her daughter couldn’t talk. This only made Louise flush scarlet.

“So, where are we going to eat?” Will asked.

“I was thinking of this little Muggle place near Piccadilly,” Beth said, speaking generally and not looking at Will except for a disdainful glance in his direction. “Apparently it’s really good.” She gave a cheesy grin and held one thumb up at a jaunty angle. “Prunella recommends,” she quipped, naming the woman who critiqued restaurants in the food section of the Daily Prophet.

“What kind of food is it?”

“All sorts. French, Italian, Mexican. Whatever, really.”

Will shrugged. “I don’t know what anyone else thinks, but it sounds good to me.”

Agreeing on the restaurant in Piccadilly, they set off. It was a fairly long walk, but they thought it would be nice to show Marianne the sights of London – deciding to detour to show her some more. Of course, Marianne seemed to be asleep, but Ginny firmly denied this, and ‘ooh’ed and ‘ah’ed for her, just in case.

Big Ben; ice-cream shops (Ginny was very enthusiastic); the Tower Bridge; the Tower of London; red double-decker buses; Trafalgar Square; taxis; a musical displayed everywhere declaring, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers; Piccadilly Circus; lots of EXTRA! EXTRA! signs...

A BAKER’ DOZEN?

TWELTH PERSON INJURED IN LUNATIC ATTACKS – IF THIS WOMAN IS SIGHTED, PLEASE CALL 012793635

“What exactly happened?” Ginny finally asked, after having seen the bulletin at least five times.

Beth chuckled. “Peregrine, you need to need to get out of interviews and into the real world,” she said. “Either that, or actually read the paper once it’s published.”

“That’s boring, though,” she huffed. “Tom reads the articles. I look at the comics and the sports pages. So, what’s going on with this lunatic?”

“Oh, just some crazy woman going around attacking people,” said Will, who she recalled worked in the crime department. “I mean, if I’m honest, it’s quite often that this sort of thing happens. We’re just quite lucky that so far she’s only killed one person. I mean, it’s been a lot worse.” He looked over at Beth. “Do you remember the Gaunt case?”

Ginny stopped stock-still and stared. “The Gaunt case?”

“Oh, God, yeah.” Beth cringed, seeming to forget her animosity towards Louise’s boyfriend. “That was awful.”

The Gaunt case? As in... Merope Gaunt? Morfin Gaunt?

“What was the Gaunt case?” Ginny asked slowly, pushing Marianne to the restaurant steps, which was only a few metres away.

“Pretty much the same as now – woman psychopath - but instead of London, it was Southern Scotland. But it was quite a lot more serious back then.”

“Details?”

“You’re nineteen, aren’t you?” Beth asked. “It’s before your time, then.”

“Details?” Ginny pressed.

“Alright, calm down,” said Louise softly, surprising everyone by speaking up. “It was before my time, as well.”

“It was about twenty-odd years ago, I think. I was about seventeen; I had a summer job at the Prophet. There was a woman named Merope Gaunt in the South of Scotland who went ballistic – though it was expected, apparently, because her whole family were crazy...” Will explained. “She basically went on a rampage killing loads of Muggles. They never caught her, but someone found her dead in alleyway in the end.”

“She killed Muggles?” Ginny repeated, bewildered. That didn’t make sense, though, because... because Merope was the good one. Wasn’t she?

Her mind flashed back to how calm and – well, un-lunatic-y, if that was a word – Morfin had been. And now, to hear how crazy Merope had been. Perhaps Morfin was the moral twin, and Merope the immoral one. What did that mean, though? If Merope was bad twin, and she had died...

She jolted with sudden, painful realisation.

Merope was the immoral one.

She had to a child.

And shortly after, she had died.

Died of symptoms similar to Tom’s.

Tom, who had a child.

Tom, who had the immoral twin inside him.

So that’s what it meant. For some reason, the curse included that as soon as the next pair of twins were born, the immoral of the previous pair would die. The question was, would Tom’s second soul be strong enough to take him with it?

xxx

A/N: RAGHR! Yeah, I'm so sorry that it's taken forever to get this up. The next one isn't going to be too quick, either, because I had the rest of the plot written up on a piece of paper... which I had beside the laptop before dinner... which is now gone... and, plus, my main point, is that I'm doing my GCSEs all this month and the next. So... yeah. But I'm trying, honestly. Dedicated as a brownie-scout. (salute) Please review!

Chapter Thirty-Six: The Hand That Drives It

Her breath caught. He was washing blood down the sink. He caught her staring and his jaw tightened. "It's nothing," he muttered, drying his hands. His head bowed in the shadows. "I won't die," he said, and, for all of his bravado and this-is-stupid talk, his voice was strangely subdued. "Is that enough?"

"...Fine. Fine." Beth slammed her glass down onto the table, glaring. "I don't know about you, but I didn't have to world's best father. He never spoke to me, but I suppose I was the lucky one. He left my brother disabled. We decided it was kinder to let him go. My mother was barely strong enough to stand it, but what could she do? For some idiot reason, she actually loved him. And every night, when she came to me after whatever my father had put her through, she always said the same thing. 'Don't worry, Lizzie,' it was. 'They're not all like this. Don't let your father discourage you from love. It's a beautiful thing'. She died of internal bleeding, but I was still fool enough to believe her."

"It was about twenty-odd years ago, I think. I was about seventeen; I had a summer job at the Prophet. There was a woman named Merope Gaunt in the South of Scotland who went ballistic – though it was expected, apparently, because her whole family were crazy..." Will explained. "She basically went on a rampage killing loads of Muggles. They never caught her, but someone found her dead in alleyway in the end."

Her mind flashed back to how calm and – well, un-lunatic-y, if that was a word – Morfin had been. And now, to hear how crazy Merope had been. Perhaps Morfin was the moral twin, and Merope the immoral one. What did that mean, though? If Merope was bad twin, and she had died... She jolted with sudden, painful realisation. Merope was the immoral one. She had to a child. And shortly after, she had died. Died of symptoms similar to Tom's. Tom, who had a child. Tom, who had the immoral twin inside him.

So that's what it meant. For some reason, the curse included that as soon as the next pair of twins were born, the immoral of the previous

pair would die. The question was, would Tom's second soul be strong enough to take him with it?

xxx

Monday morning. Another day.

It was mostly dark in the bedroom, but a few cracks of lights came from the curtains, and under the door. These rays of lights failed to stretch far enough to the bed, reaching only as far as a foot before faltering on the ground.

Ginny rolled over to look at Tom, who she knew was still in bed due to his weight sinking the left side of the mattress slightly. From a glance, he appeared to be asleep. She decided that she would let him sleep a while longer.

She clambered out of bed and moved to check Marianne. However, her daughter was asleep as well, and as well as Ginny knew that she should wake her up and get the day started early, so that the morning was less of a hurry, she couldn't bring herself to disturb the peace.

Aw, hell. You can both sleep another ten minutes, she thought to herself.

Glancing back once over her shoulder at Tom, she slipped through the door, her footsteps muffled on the cream carpet. She closed the door behind her and breathed a sigh of relief. A quiet few minutes, without Marianne tired or hungry or just randomly crying; without Tom stumbling about wearily, forever reminding her that his time was running out. Thank Merlin.

She moved to the window and checked the post. There were two letters – as usual, from Grace and Alden. She opened Alden's first.

Dear Ginny,

I hope that you and Tom and Marianne are doing well. It's strange, having to always remind myself that there are three of you now and that I have to include an extra name in my standard greeting...

anyway, I know that Tom was feeling unwell the last time I heard from you. It's probably gone away by now, but I thought I would check anyway. I'm going off on a tangent – the main point of this letter is to invite you to a sort of dinner party, except informal, and a lot less obnoxious than the term 'dinner party' implies. We would be celebrating Dominic's recovery – with Dom as the guest star himself. Write back soon if you want to come, so that I know how many tables I need to book in the restaurant.

-Alden

PS. Is Grace alright? She still hasn't answered any of my letters, and I wasn't sure. Do you know if she's still with Luke? They were rather... rocky, so to speak, the last I heard. But I haven't heard in a long time, so I don't know. I'm just worried about her, that's all. ...You of all people would understand.

PPS. Did you know that Jack Swithin is dating Claude Bastet? Again? I did tell him that I didn't think it was a good idea, but he's missed her a lot... God knows why. Anyway. Talk to you soon.

Jack. And. Claude. Together. Again.

Ginny twitched.

Well, there was no accounting for taste with some people, but she supposed that she wasn't to interfere. She re-read the first post-note, feeling an ache of sadness deep in her gut. Grace and Alden were still such a problem. It had been almost exactly five months since the big collision of hearts at the Castledon-Bailey Station, and still no-one was happy. It was ridiculous.

She opened Grace's letter. Yay. Now she had to read another page or so of emo love-triangle scribble.

Hi Ginny-poo,

Hm. I think I'll start by saying that life sucks. Alden's still sending me letters. I opened one, just to see what it said, even though I promised myself that I wouldn't. I only saw some cheesy words like 'love' and

'always' and 'please' and then I set fire to it. As well as all of the two hundred and fifty-seven others. Yes, I counted. Shut up. And stop raising your eyebrows. I know you are doing.

Luke's not living with me anymore. We broke up a few weeks ago. I know, I should have told you earlier, but I was feeling too depressed to explain. It was just... messy. He started sleeping on the sofa... and he found Alden's letters and got really angry... but then he didn't seem to care at all... and he brought a blonde bimbo home, but he said they were just talking. Then she left, and I told him that I didn't care if he'd slept with her and he said okay he did, and I asked if he fancied her, and he said no and he looked really honest and quite sad. And then I said do you fancy me and he said no. And I said did you ever fancy me and he said of course. And I said when did you stop fancying me and he said that he thinks it was a long time ago but he only just realised. And I said okay. And then he said are you still my girlfriend and I said no. And he said okay. And then he started packing.

I still see him in lessons and on campus and stuff, and we're very friendly. It was a bit awkward at first, but now it's getting better. I don't mind anymore than we aren't together. What gets me is... well, I was always avoiding Alden because I had Luke. And now I don't. And now I don't know why I'm avoiding him. And I don't want to avoid him anymore. But I have to. I think.

Well, whatever.

Talk to me soon, I miss you loads. Sophomore year is alright so far. That's a point, actually – I only have to withstand the awkwardness of Luke until May, and then he'll graduate. Then I never have to talk to him again, if I don't want to, but I think I will, because if you exclude how possessive and emotional he is, he's really lovely. As a friend. I just think he's too over-the-top for a boyfriend. And I don't love him. But I'm going back onto the Alden topic, and I don't want to.

Lots of love, Grace xxx

Ginny dropped the letter to the coffee table and shoved a hand roughly backwards through her red hair. Honestly, her best friends

were so stupid. They couldn't see what they were missing even if it danced in front of them in neon lingerie.

She glanced at Grace's writing, but decided that she could write a reply at work if she got too bored – but she would have to hide it from Angeline, or she'd get in trouble for skiving off work. It didn't really matter. Angeline never came to see her anyway. Ginny suspected that her boss was still sore about her marrying Tom.

Hah. Owned.

Looking up at the clock, Ginny saw that a good fifteen minutes had passed.

Jesus, how slowly do I read? No wonder I always ran out of time in exams. She sighed again. I should probably get Marianne.

She expected that she would have to wake Tom up as well if he was still asleep, as he still insisted on going to work despite his condition. She didn't approve – every day, when she shook him awake, he would open his eyes to a sad, disapproving hazel stare, challenging him into feeling guilty. It hadn't worked so far, but today just might be that day. She pushed open the bedroom door, ready to drag him from sleep... however, as she squinted at him through the faint gloom, she saw that his eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling.

For one heart-stopping moment she thought that he was dead.

"Tom?" She froze, terrified. "Tom?!"

Then she realised that he was breathing, and she relaxed infinitesimally.

But why would he still be lying here? Why would he not have woken up and seen to Marianne and got dressed and washed and read the Daily Prophet and told me the interesting parts while I attempt to make breakfast? Why isn't he up?

Tom didn't answer, as she then understood how every breath was rapid, short, and heavy – as though there was something sitting on

his chest and crushing his lungs. He was severely struggling just to breathe in and out.

She hurried immediately to his side, perching on a tiny fraction of the bed beside him. "What's wrong?" she asked in a very small voice. She didn't know what to do. She wasn't the one doing medical school. She had no idea what she was supposed to say, what she was supposed to do, to make everything alright again.

She was beginning to doubt that everything was ever going to be alright again.

Tom's eyes flashed to hers quickly, but then he looked back up at the ceiling, screwing his face up slightly in the effort of breathing. One hand – his right hand, closer to her – twitched as though he was considered moving it, and then he clawed at his stomach, clumsily, robotically, digging his nails in as he attempted to drag air into his lungs.

Ginny panicked.

Come on, come on – you have to know something about first-aid!

"Try to relax," she told him, taking his hand and smoothing her thumb over the ice-cold skin. "Just cl– no. Just try to relax."

She had been about say 'just close your eyes' but then she had been scared that they would never open again.

"Slowly... slowly... breathe. In - and out – slowly. It's okay, I promise, it's okay. It's okay."

His words took a long time to come out. "...Is it?"

She ignored this. "I'm going to presume, then, that you're not going to work today?" she asked quietly.

Tom didn't say anything, but he slumped slightly in defeat.

It meant a lot that he was finally giving up his obstinacy and admitting that he was ill. It meant that the curse was progressing – and progressing a lot faster than she had ever expected.

She lifted his hand and touched her lips lightly to his knuckles. “You know I love you... so much,” she whispered, even if he wasn’t listening. “And you’re going to be okay.”

He didn’t respond. Ginny wasn’t sure whether he simply hadn’t heard, or if he didn’t want to answer. Either way, she continued murmuring to him. Time passed slowly, Marianne stirring quietly from her own sleep behind them, and then Ginny realised that Tom was breathing easy, his eyes closed, sleeping.

xxx

The coffee at work tasted funny. Well, in truth, it probably tasted nice, but Ginny had been drinking home-made, badly-mixed, burnt coffee for more than a month now and was used to it. She had probably destroyed her taste-buds.

She sighed and took the mug back through to her cubicle, where a case of severe writer’s block was stopping her from having any inspiration whatsoever for an article on the possibility of a Kneazle pandemic. She was hoping that this coffee would help.

In actuality, she hadn’t been due to return to work for another week from today, but about a week and a half ago, after three days of Tom being unable to go to work, she had decided that something had to be done. Money didn’t grow under the sofa seats – that was only when it fell out of her pockets and dropped down the back – and they weren’t rich enough to live without either of them working. She hadn’t really been sure about leaving Marianne with Tom (she still wasn’t) because, firstly, she was worried that in this weak state, Tom’s alter-ego might triumph and hurt their daughter; and secondly, she knew that Marianne would only make him worse, not better. She had realised, though, that they had no other option.

Ginny sank into her seat and took a deep gulp from her coffee. A combination of the taste and the heat of it stung her throat, but she didn't care.

Beth walked past with arms full of paper, at that moment.

Ginny lifted her head – and the mug – therefore splashing some up her nose – which hurt – and waved.

“Ow!” she exclaimed loudly, which certainly attracted Beth's attention, even if the enthusiastic wave hadn't. “Oh my God, that's hot – ow, ow, ow!”

“Hi,” said Beth. Then her voice and expression took on a disdainful edge. “By the way, can you tell your friend to stop stalking me? Thank you.” She walked away, leaving the redhead utterly confused.

“What?” She set down her mug, still holding a hand over her scalded nose, and leaned back in her chair to stare after her friend. “Who?” However, just because all celestial beings, in heaven or hell or purgatory or even rotting in the ground, hated her, she leaned too far and the chair tipped over.

Crash.

...Today is not my day.

“Be-eth,” she called irritably as she got clumsily to her feet and flipped her chair upright. If the older woman was going to cause her multiple painful accidents, then at least she could stay around to explain herself. “Get back here. I will not tolerate your un-explaining-ness. Really.”

She waited.

Nothing. Beth did not come back.

She huffed, and went back to work. She didn't honestly expect that she would have any inspiration, and she didn't. She had some more coffee. Nada. A little more... nope.

For God's sake.

There was no way that she was ever going to be promoted to a journalist if she carried on like this. She just needed to face it – she was scrawny little twenty-year-old Ginny Peregrine (Riddle), the small girl out of her depth in the big boy's pool.

"Hey, don't look so sad," Louise said softly, appearing by her side.

"I'm way too young for this," Ginny muttered. "I should really still be making coffees for Angeline."

"But you're not, and that shows a lot. You're not much younger than me – only a few years – and you're doing much, much better than I did when I was your age, honestly."

"You know what," said Ginny thoughtfully, looking up at the blonde, "I think that's the longest sentence I've ever heard you say in one go."

Louise flushed scarlet, and Ginny felt bad for making her friend feel uncomfortable.

"I'm only joking," she said hastily.

She would have said more, but at that moment a tiny dark-haired boy (who she swore couldn't be older than fifteen) turned up. "Post, Mizz Riddle," he drawled in a heavy London accent, and tossed a bundle onto her desk.

"See?" said Ginny. "I should be doing that." She peered after him. "I'm not much taller, actually."

Louise offered a timid, half-hearted smile, but she was still red from the jab at how quiet she was. "What have you got?" she asked, nodding at the bundle of letters.

"No idea."

Ginny picked the bundle up. She was still getting frequent letters from Grace and Alden – she had delightedly accepted the invitation to see Dominic well again – and apologise for being his demise in the first place – but not much had changed since the status update a little over a week ago. Perhaps her friends had decided to write to her at work... it was a first, but she supposed it wasn't an idea that had never been considered before. She inspected the bundle. In actuality, there were only two letters in the pile, both quite thin, but the elastic band pinning them together compressed their middles and flicked the ends up, giving them an appearance of being larger than reality.

She read the untidy scrawl on the front of the first letter and recognised it as Luke's handwriting. What on earth could he want?

Ginny,

Can you please tell your idiot friend Menzies to get over herself?
Thanks. How are you, by the way?

-Luke

She frowned, and glanced down the hallway at where Beth was. The older woman was talking to Martha, who was in charge of the obituary column. She then recalled what Beth had said a few minutes ago that had been so confusing.

"Hi," said Beth. Then her voice and expression took on a disdainful edge. "By the way, can you tell your friend to stop stalking me? Thank you."

"Ohhh," she murmured to herself. She hadn't realised that Luke and Beth had ever spoken – or even met – other than the times she had been present and had accidentally forced them into each other's presences. "Well."

She didn't want to cause waves, but she was still annoyed that Beth wouldn't explain what was going on, and, in the hope of finding out, called down the narrow hallway, "Menz? Luke says to get over yourself."

Beth's face darkened to fury, her eyes narrowing, thin grey slits. She said something to Martha to excuse herself, and then stormed down towards Ginny. She slammed her palms down hard onto the redhead's desk, thrusting her thin, angry face into her cubicle, and growled out, "What?"

"I don't know," said Ginny innocently. "That's just what he said. Why, what happened?"

An animalist snarl came from Beth. "God, he's so annoying – I told you to tell him to stop stalking me. And he is, he can't deny it! I've run into him five times now. By coincidence. And every time, no, he can't just walk past me, no, he's got to try and talk to me, as though I ever would want to speak with an arsehole like him!" She snarled again, glaring, her lip curling back. "I cannot believe him."

"Maybe he's just being friendly?" Ginny suggested fearfully.

"Friendly," Beth scoffed. "He's stalking me. I'm actually scared he's going to try and kill me."

Trust me, Ginny thought ruefully, you do not know how it feels to have someone stalk you and try to kill you. Don't ever go there.

Beth shook her head, her short dark hair slipping across her nose. "Just tell him to stay the hell away from me."

"Okay." Ginny shrugged. The less of her friends were at each other's throats, the better, in her opinion.

As Beth traipsed back down the corridor to Martha, who had been staring at the exchange with worry in her wide eyes, and Louise left to find Will, Ginny turned to the second letter. The front was blank.

Interesting.

She tore it open.

Her eyes flickered across the text and all of the air rushed out of her lungs.

This fight has been going on for far too long.

We know how this is going to finish.

It's completely unnecessary.

We need to talk.

It ends within a fortnight.

It's time to stop playing this game.

And I assure you, I won't be on the losing team.

It wasn't signed but she knew exactly who it was from. None other than Bernard Terby. Terrorising her when she thought that life couldn't get any worse, when she thought that she couldn't sink any lower. She was already watching a knife fall towards her skin, without the need of a hand driving it there.

xxx

A/N: Yay, a quick update. I've been working hard to get this out quickly. I didn't really know how to end this chapter, so I decided just to finish it there, on a vaguely poetically sinister note. Well, lots of twists here... muahahaha. Now it's getting interesting. Please review, je t'aime.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Don't You Forget About Me

Tom didn't say anything, but he slumped slightly in defeat. It meant a lot that he was finally giving up his obstinacy and admitting that he was ill. It meant that the curse was progressing – and progressing a lot faster than she had ever expected. She lifted his hand and touched her lips lightly to his knuckles. "You know I love you... so much," she whispered, even if he wasn't listening. "And you're going to be okay." He didn't respond. Ginny wasn't sure whether he simply hadn't heard, or if he didn't want to answer. Either way, she continued murmuring to him. Time passed slowly, Marianne stirring quietly from her own sleep behind them, and then Ginny realised that Tom was breathing easy, his eyes closed, sleeping.

"Hi," said Beth. Then her voice and expression took on a disdainful edge. "By the way, can you tell your friend to stop stalking me? Thank you." She walked away, leaving the redhead utterly confused.

Her eyes flickered across the text and all of the air rushed out of her lungs. This fight has been going on for far too long. We know how this is going to finish. It's completely unnecessary. We need to talk. It ends within a fortnight. It's time to stop playing this game. And I assure you, I won't be on the losing team. It wasn't signed but she knew exactly who it was from. None other than Bernard Terby. Terrorising her when she thought that life couldn't get any worse, when she thought that she couldn't sink any lower. She was already watching a knife fall towards her skin, without the need of a hand driving it there.

xxx

Ginny rang the doorbell.

Glancing up at Tom, close beside her, she shifted Marianne on her shoulder and waited for someone to answer.

Eleanor Fionn lived with her boyfriend in an apartment very similar to Ginny and Tom's own (excluding the fact that it was in one of the poshest areas of London, and a penthouse, and ridiculously expensive) and it was there that they were taking Marianne, for safety.

They thought that it would be best, until the fight with Bernard was over. If Bernard had been watching them as closely as she suspected, then he would know that she was closest to Grace and Alden, and that she would probably take her daughter there. She thought that Bernard would not guess that she would take her to one of Tom's friends, who she hadn't spoken to in a very long time.

The door clicked open, and a strangely familiar man looked out. He was of average height, with untidy dark hair, and a boyish face. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah - is Eleanor in?" Ginny smiled brightly, trying to act as though it wasn't at all unusual to turn up on someone's doorstep with a baby in tow. Not suspicious. No. Not at all.

"Er." The man turned away from the door and yelled, "Ellie!"

"Yar-huh?"

"Door."

"Who is it?"

The man turned a raised eyebrow on her.

"Tom and Ginny W-P-Riddle," she said, and then flushed pink at her own stupidity.

"It's Tom and Ginny Wuhpriddle!"

"Riddle," Tom corrected tiredly, making her feel even more stupid.

However, by this point, Eleanor had already arrived, clad in a pink dress and matching reading glasses. "Ohmigod!" she shrieked, pushing back her boyfriend and hugging Ginny tight, making sure to hug carefully around a rather alarmed Marianne. "What on earth are you doing here? And with little – what's her face – Marianne – I remembered! – Marianne as well? This is so unexpected!"

"You're not busy, are you?" Ginny asked worriedly.

“Oh, no,” Eleanor gushed, moving on to wrap her arms tightly around Tom, who tensed but tolerated it. “Come in, come in. Well, Charlie’s just going out somewhere, you know, a man-night, or something, you would understand, right-”

Ginny frowned. Not really. She doubted that Tom had ever been out on a ‘man-night’ in his life.

“-but I was just going to sit and get on with some work, you know... planning some stuff...” Eleanor beamed, and held up her left hand – showing them a fat gold ring topped with the biggest diamond Ginny had ever seen in her life.

“You’re getting married?!” Ginny exclaimed, removing her coat with one hand while balancing Marianne on her hip with the other. “Why haven’t I been invited? Hmph.”

“Of course you’ll be invited, silly,” Eleanor scoffed. “We’re still planning everything; he only asked me last week.”

Tom, Ginny realised, was staring at the blonde’s hand. She was about to ask if he was feeling alright when he abruptly asked, his voice rough and raw with sickness, “How much did that cost?”

Eleanor giggled. “I don’t know,” she exclaimed. “You’re not supposed to ask, you know. I don’t think it was too expensive – I hope not. I feel awful that he would have spent a lot of money on me...”

The line of thought going through Tom’s head was now immediately apparent, as his face darkened slightly and he stared down at the floor, envy and wistfulness visible in what of his expression wasn’t hidden. Ginny’s stomach clenched. She found her wedding ring, on the hand holding Marianne, and twisted it absently around her finger. A simple gold band. Nothing more. No diamonds.

Waiting until their host wasn’t paying attention, Ginny caught Tom’s eyes and mouthed, “I wouldn’t want that anyway.”

Tom ignored her.

“Do you want something to drink?” Eleanor asked. “You remember my obsession with tea, right, Tom – hasn’t gone yet? Oh, I’ll make you some anyway – sit down, go on, over there – oh, are you going now, Charlie? Alright, see you later,” she latched onto him with a kiss, clearly a lot less private about her relationship that Tom and Ginny were, “and I heart you, you know that.”

“Love,” her boyfriend said, ruffling her blonde hair affectionately as though she were a cat, and then disappeared out the door.

“Love-love-love!” she shouted after him, and then turned to her guests. “Right. Tea. I’ll be right back.” She disappeared, leaving the dysfunctional Riddle family in the hallway.

Ginny reached a hand for Tom’s arm, and looked up quickly into his pale, unhealthy face. “I would only ever use something like that as a paper-weight,” she told him quietly. “It doesn’t matter.”

“That’s not the point,” he muttered, throat like sandpaper. “The point is that Fionn’s ring probably costs more than our apartment. ...And I could never get you anything like that.”

“Come on.” She linked her fingers through his and pulled him through to the luxurious living room that Eleanor had pointed out they could sit down in. “How are you feeling?” she whispered in an undertone, her gaze flickering over the dark shadows under his eyes, and the sheer whiteness of his skin.

“Fine,” he said shortly. His tone implied that this was the end of the conversation.

She sighed.

Eleanor returned a moment later, Levitating three mugs of steaming tea. She set them down on the table. “I know, it’s all so crazy... did you two feel like that when you first got engaged, or...?” Her eyes flashed across them, but lingered an especially long time on Tom, and a small, knowing smile lit up her lips. Ginny wondered what she knew.

Tom shifted uncomfortably. Observing him over the top of her mug of tea, which she sipped happily, Ginny suspected that it was something to do with his past relationship with Eleanor as annoying match-maker. She recalled the blonde telling her that she had been pushing Tom to ask her out ever since she first noticed that he allegedly 'forgot what he was doing every time he came near her'. She was curious as to what other things she hadn't picked up on.

Eleanor held up her hands defensively. "Okay, sorry if I'm embarrassing you or something," she laughed. "I wasn't trying to be mean, I swear. I'm just... I'm so excited!" She squealed, flapping her free hand, sloshing her mug of tea from side to side. "To think that I will be... Mrs. Eleanor Maeve Potter!"

Ginny choked on her tea.

Charlus Potter, father of James Potter. Charlus. Charlie.

Tom froze. His eyes snapped up to Eleanor's face, like shards of black ice. He stared at her for a very long time, and then his gaze flashed sideways to Ginny and back again. And once more. Very slowly, he said, "What?"

Eleanor looked confused. "What-what?" she repeated. "Did I say something? Mrs. Eleanor Maeve Potter? What's wrong with that?"

Tom's jaw tightened at the repetition of the name. He stared down at the floor, his lip twitching upwards slightly in contempt. "Nothing," he ground out. "Never mind." He did, however, shift infinitesimally across the sofa, closer to Ginny, and leaned forwards, as though shielding her.

From a scrawny teenage boy who hadn't even been born yet. Silly.

'What did I do?' Eleanor mouthed across at Ginny, bewildered.

'It doesn't matter', Ginny mouthed back. She set down her mug of tea (most of which was dripping, scalding hot, down her chin anyway), and in the meantime, jostled and nearly dropped Marianne. She

yelped, and, at the last second, clumsily caught her daughter, and hugged her close to her. "Sorry," she said. "Mummy's too clumsy for a baby, honestly."

"Oh, do you want somewhere for Marianne, or-"

"No, she's fine," Ginny said defensively, holding her perhaps unnecessarily close, wanting every last moment with her to linger. Not long before Marianne would be gone for... a while.

"Babies are so cute," Eleanor said, sighing dreamily. "I wish I was pregnant. Well, if I ever am, I'll probably not want to be... still-"

"Actually," Ginny interrupted, loudly enough to drown out Eleanor's noisy chatter – which could often never be stopped. She glanced over at Tom for confirmation, but he was staring down at the floor. A green tinge had come into his face. Maybe it was all the jealousy. She hoped he wasn't going to be sick. Seeing that he wasn't going to join in, she continued, "that's what we wanted to talk to you about."

"Oh." Eleanor's face furrowed into a frown, clearly not understanding.

Ginny checked Tom again. He wasn't looking at her still. "Do you want to say it?" she asked him quietly, forcing him to acknowledge the turn of conversation.

"You can," he muttered.

"Righty-ho," said Eleanor. "Now that you've decided that, why don't you actually try telling me?"

The redhead flushed red. "Of course." She held Marianne on her knee and stared into the identical eyes in her daughter's face. Marianne made a small, bird-like noise, reaching her small hands forwards. An ache of sadness panged painfully through Ginny. "I need someone to take Marianne for a while," she said shortly. "And I was hoping it would be you."

"What do you mean?"

“I mean...” she struggled. “I mean that I want you have Marianne. Baby-sit, sort of.” She attempted a smile. “It would help you to prepare for the idea of having a baby, you know? And also, maybe it would suggest to Charlie that you wanted one.”

The weak smile was failing. She dropped it.

“Are you going on holiday?”

Later, Ginny would reflect and wish that she had simply said ‘yes’. However, stupidly, she mumbled, “We wish.”

Tom fired a dark look at her, clearly thinking that she was giving away too much.

Eleanor narrowed her eyes at them suspiciously. “What is happening? Why are you all so secretive? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Ginny tried to reassure her. She reached out a hand to pat her friend’s arm.

“Don’t patronise me; I’m not stupid.” Eleanor folded her arms. “You tell me what the hell is going on right now.”

“No,” Tom growled at exactly the same moment as Ginny sighed and confessed, “She’s in danger.”

“Ginny,” Tom hissed, furious.

Eleanor’s blue eyes widened. “Oh my God!” she exclaimed. “What kind of danger – what – I don’t-” She shook her head. “What have you done, killed someone?”

Tom went rigid, his jaw clamping tight. His eyes fixed on the floorboards, he fell silent and unmoving.

“I just don’t understand...” Eleanor said. She pushed a hand over her hair and fixed her fringe, a nervous habit that she didn’t whenever confused or faced with what she perceived to be a moral dilemma. “It’s ridiculous. What danger could a baby possibly be in?”

“Please, Eleanor,” said Ginny. “I just... I think she would be safest with you. No-one would expect me to come to you to hide her.”

“What if that ‘no-one’ – whatever you’ve gotten yourselves into, yeah – what if he, she, it – what if they come here? Am I bait? Am I supposed to risk myself and Charlie and everything we have for you two?”

“He wouldn’t,” Ginny said. “You have no parts in what he’s doing. If he does discover that Marianne’s here, he’ll just break in...” she swallowed around a lump in her throat, “...kill Marianne... and then leave. No damage. Maybe a note to pass on to us. You wouldn’t be involved at all.”

Eleanor didn’t speak. She bit her lip.

And then the unexpected: “Just keep her safe,” Tom said quietly. “I can take care of Ginny if you can take care of Marianne.”

The blonde sighed heavily. “Okay.” She forced a bright smile. “Let me know when it’s all ready for you to have her back – I won’t steal her, I promise – and she will be perfectly fine and dandy with us. Charlie won’t mind.”

Ginny was filled to the core with relief and she leaned over to give her friend a one-armed hug. She could always count on Eleanor to be cheerful in the worst situation. Maybe it was a Gryffindor quality. Or a blonde quality. Or maybe just an Eleanor Maeve Fionn Potter quality. “I actually love you right now.”

“Do you have any water?” Tom suddenly interrupted. Ginny looked over at him and cringed. He did not look well. He was definitely green now, swaying slightly, and there was cold perspiration beading his forehead.

“Um.” Eleanor looked alarmed. “Yeah, I suppose, let me just-”

Then he got to his feet, stumbling. “I’ll...” His words were slurred with illness. “I’ll be right back. Don’t do anything stupid. Eleanor, make

sure she's-" He jerked, his face crumpling, and disappeared down the corridor. He had probably been here before, and knew where he was going, Ginny guessed. She stared after him miserably.

"Is he okay?" Eleanor asked.

She slumped. "...Not really," she whispered. "I don't know what to do. I'm so concerned about him. He refuses to even admit that he's sick, but it's just so..." She flailed a hand helplessly in the air, searching for a word, but found nothing. She looked down glumly at her feet.

"It's not helping anything how worried he is about you, either," Eleanor pointed out. "If I were you, I would sort this 'danger' problem out as soon as possible. If anyone can get hospitalised for worrying alone, it's him. I have never in all my life seen anyone as permanently panicked about someone else's well-being as him."

Well, he does have a reason.

"Have you done anything?" Eleanor probed. "I'm not being nosy or anything, but if you've been, I don't know, seeing someone else or something-"

"No!" she gasped, horrified. "For God's sake!"

"I'm just saying!" the blonde shrugged. "I mean, it's not as though I revere him or anything in my list of close friends – being honest, he's a pain ninety-nine percent of time – but I'm probably the closest thing he has to a close friend, excluding you, of course, and... well, he loves you. With everything he has. And even if it's not much, he can't give you any more. I don't like seeing him like this."

"I know," said Ginny, her voice a sad whisper. "I don't like it either."

"You know," said Eleanor, "when we'd both left school, and you were still there, we visited each other quite a lot. Just purely because it felt weird without the people I was used to being around twenty-four-seven. For me, at least. And it was always... you. Maybe it was being with me that reminded him of how things were back at school; maybe

he wasn't always like that – but whenever we met up, he was completely focused on you.”

Ginny tilted her head, her expression caught between a smile and a frown. “Really?”

“I don't mean he was always talking about you. He liked hearing about you, but he didn't like talking about you. Sort of like you were his. But little things. Walk past a woman with red hair and he'd be distracted. Anything the colour green. Chocolate. High-heeled shoes. Butterbeer. Yellow flowers. Red wine.” Eleanor laughed. “It was adorable, actually, in a strange way. And then, I remember one day, we were in a cafe, and I was struggling more than usual to make conversation. He was completely in a different world. Just staring into space. Thinking. He was barely even listening – I had to yell ‘Ginny’ at one point to get his attention so I could say goodbye to him. He didn't seem to care. He walked away... and then, for some reason, he turned around and came back. And he paused. And then, completely out of the blue, he said, ‘I'm going to ask her to marry me’. It was the sweetest thing I'd ever seen.”

Ginny grinned. She had an urge to hug herself, but doing so would squash Marianne. She settled for squeezing her daughter tightly instead, smiling to herself.

“Just don't hurt him,” Eleanor concluded. “I don't know if his feelings have anything to do with how ill he is, but...” She shook her head, running a hand through her hair again.

There was an awkward silence. Ginny wondered what Tom was doing, how long it was taking, and what Eleanor was thinking.

Probably thinking about Grandpa Potter, she mused. That was too bizarre to contemplate, though, and she wished that she didn't need to get so confused with strange details.

“Anyway,” Eleanor chirped cheerfully. “Onto lighter topics – it's October the twenty-fifth, Ginny! Six days until your big Halloween birthday party, and I'm still not invited! I gave you your time to invite

me since you walked through the door, and still nothing. I'm offended. Some friend you are."

"I'm actually not having a party this year," the younger woman said slowly, apologetically.

"What?" Eleanor threw her hands in the air. "Your parties are always amazing, though! They're so much fun. You are the soul of the party – you have to have one! Marianne's first Halloween, as well!"

"Well, she won't be with me, will she?" said Ginny, smiling ruefully. "She'll be with you."

"True..." Eleanor pouted. "Still. You're such a party-pooper."

"No, I just don't think it would appropriate to have a party right now. What with Tom being so ill and all these problems and things..." she heaved a heavy-hearted sigh. "Maybe next year. Maybe I'll throw a really good Christmas party, instead, or a New Year's party."

"You better," Eleanor threatened.

Ginny opened her mouth, planning to joke what Eleanor would do if she didn't, but then Tom reappeared. He was rocking from side to side, one arm wrapped tightly around his stomach. His hollow eyes found hers.

She stood immediately and hurried to her husband – and as she drew near him, she noticed the strangest thing. With every step she took towards him, his shaking increased, his face became paler, and he looked closer to fainter.

Marianne.

Her mouth fell slightly open. She stopped dead in the middle of the living room.

She hadn't thought that Marianne was having such a direct effect on him. Maybe it was being in close contact with her all the time that made him so ill... Maybe this was another advantage to having

Eleanor baby-sit her daughter for a while. Tom could recover, and then they would live happily ever after, like they were supposed to.

“Are you okay?” Ginny asked, maintaining her distance, as she was still holding Marianne.

Tom struggled to even answer for a moment. There was a moment’s tense silence, and then jerkily he shook his head.

Ginny chewed her lip. “Come on,” she said reluctantly, “let’s just go. Eleanor can look after Marianne; she’ll be fine. Let’s just get you home before you hurt yourself.” She turned back to the blonde woman, resisting the motherly urge to cling tightly to her daughter and not let her go. This was for Marianne’s safety. It was the best thing. She kissed Marianne’s chubby little cheek. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “I’ll come back for you, I promise. It’s going to be alright.” Then, feeling tears spike her hazel eyes, she held her out to Eleanor.

“No,” Tom abruptly rasped out.

Both females looked over at him in surprise.

Tom stared at Marianne. The little baby girl kicked her legs, still hanging in the air between Eleanor and Ginny, and held her fat arms out for her father.

He moved with a shaky determination towards them, his breathing laboured with every metre he traversed. Ignoring the looks of confusion coming from his closest friend and his wife, he took Marianne into his arms, and held her carefully against his chest. His breath hitched audibly, his brow furrowing with effort. And he pressed his lips lightly to her forehead.

“Don’t forget me,” he murmured, quietly enough that Ginny had to strain to hear him. Her heart plunged to her stomach. He was acknowledging the fact that they might not come back... alive, if anything. He held onto Marianne for what looked like as long as he could bear – then he gave a small gasp, his hands trembling so much that Ginny was frightened he was going to drop Marianne, and returned her to Eleanor.

And then they turned their backs on her.

Marianne, too young to understand, giggled and knew no different.

xxx

So, yeah, instead of one ridiculously loooong chapter, which would be literally – forty-something pages, I'm giving you three rather short chapters. Plus it's fun for suspense. And it drags the plot out longer. Muahaha. No, I'm joking. Next update should be quick, considering I've typed out most of it. Love youuuu. Please review.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: The Darkness

The redhead flushed red. "Of course." She held Marianne on her knee and stared into the identical eyes in her daughter's face. Marianne made a small, bird-like noise, reaching her small hands forwards. An ache of sadness panged painfully through Ginny. "I need someone to take Marianne for a while," she said shortly. "And I was hoping it would be you."

"No," Tom abruptly rasped out. Both females looked over at him in surprise. Tom stared at Marianne. The little baby girl kicked her legs, still hanging in the air between Eleanor and Ginny, and held her fat arms out for her father. He moved with a shaky determination towards them, his breathing laboured with every metre he traversed. Ignoring the looks of confusion coming from his closest friend and his wife, he took Marianne into his arms, and held her carefully against his chest. His breath hitched audibly, his brow furrowing with effort. And he pressed his lips lightly to her forehead. "Don't forget me," he murmured, quietly enough that Ginny had to strain to hear him. Her heart plunged to her stomach. He was acknowledging the fact that they might not come back... alive, if anything. He held onto Marianne for what looked like as long as he could bear – then he gave a small gasp, his hands trembling so much that Ginny was frightened he was going to drop Marianne, and returned her to Eleanor.

And then they turned their backs on her. Marianne, too young to understand, giggled and knew no different.

xxx

On the thirty-first of October, 1961, Ginny woke up to an ache of sadness. She wanted Marianne back... and she wanted Tom back. The old Tom. The one who wasn't sick. The one she loved. The one who wasn't dying slowly every day before her eyes, just fading away, into the darkness.

Forcing herself to make an effort, despite how early it was, and the urge to go back to sleep, she rolled over onto her side to look at him.

He was pale, still, with darkened eyes and a strange translucent stretch to his eyelids.

She wondered how much longer he had left.

Tears spiked her eyes, as they always did whenever she even considered that he wasn't always going to be here... when she realised that his time was running out. She took her husband's limp hand, pressing her lips to the cool, damp skin, and curled up beside him, resting her cheek against his heart.

He stirred beneath her, twisting slightly. She looked up into his face, and attempted a smile, though she knew how she felt was glowing in her eyes. "Good morning," he whispered sleepily.

Ginny pressed her face into him, lifting her arms for a hug, the way a small child would. "I miss her," she said unhappily.

Tom held her as tightly as he could, due to how weak he was becoming. "I do too," he murmured. "Don't worry. It'll all be over soon."

She reflected on what Bernard's note had said.

It's time to stop playing this game. And I assure you, I won't be on the losing team.

She knew that it would be over soon. What she feared was that it wouldn't end the way they wanted... she was terrified. Every moment was lived in paralysing fear. She didn't know which she found more frightening – the idea that Bernard would brutally kill Tom, or that she would be helpless to watch as he died of illness before Bernard even had the chance.

"I don't want it to end," she confessed softly, her words barely audible even in the utter silence. "I want it to continue forever... because we're alive now, and that's what I'm the most scared of losing..."

"I will not lose you," he said firmly.

“I’m not scared of being lost,” she said, though this wasn’t strictly true, and she suspected that he could tell from the way her voice shook involuntarily. She didn’t want to die. “It’s the other way around.”

“We’re not going to die,” he told her.

The shade of uncertainty in the voice she knew all too well how to decode, however well he hid it, spoke otherwise.

She smiled up at him. “I intend to spend another year beside you.”

It took him a moment to decode what it had been a year since, and therefore what that meant-

“Oh,” he bit his lip. “Happy birthday.” He looked away, shame-faced. “I’m sorry – I forgot.” He looked back at her, apologetic, and then bent to kiss her. “I’ll be right back – I have something for you.”

“Yay,” she grinned, clapping her hands underneath her chin and tilting her head. She sat up so that he could slide away; concern ripped through her face as she saw him stumble, sway, nearly fall, as he stood up. “Are you okay?” she asked, but he ignored her, as he always did when she mentioned that he might not be one-hundred-percent, and staggered away to the living room.

I wish this wasn’t so hard.

She chewed her nails, worried. She tried to distract herself, and wondered what Tom had got her for her birthday.

As her thoughts dwelled on him, there was a deafening crash from the other side of the apartment.

“Tom?” she called, eyes wide.

There was no answer.

She leapt from the blankets, and ran through as fast as she could, adrenaline and blood pounding like a drum through her veins at what

she might find. She skidded on the floorboards trying to stop, burning her feet with friction, and flicked her eyes over all she saw.

Tom was lying on the floor, shards of a fragile wooden table scattered around and beneath him. He was breathing heavy, his face screwed up in pain.

Ginny hurried to his side, kicking pieces of table away and knelt beside him. "What's wrong?"

He groaned, twitching as though trying to get back up, but she could see that moving was too much for him right now; she set a hand on each of his shoulders and held him down.

"Don't move," she said gently. "You'll only make it worse. Just... wait."

Taking every word she said as law and divine order, he obeyed, remaining still. His eyes cracked open, agonised between his purple eyelids. "I..." He struggled to speak. "Ginevra... I..."

"Sssh." She put a finger to his lips.

And she lay down beside him on the icy floor.

xxx

As she neared The Tell-Tale Heart pub in Epping, near where Alden lived, Ginny was filled with many emotions, all strong, and, together, nearly overwhelming.

Anticipation. Excitement. Regret.

Guilt.

It had been over two years since she had seen Dominic Philips... fully-conscious, at least. She didn't know what meeting him would be like. He had been twelve when he had his accident... now he was just fourteen, having spent the best part of his Hogwarts education so far in a coma. She couldn't help but think that he would not be the same person at all.

She couldn't help but think of how he would blame her.

She swallowed hard, nervous, and stuffed her hands deep into the side-pockets of the white dress that Grace had given her for her birthday. Tom, beside her, and maybe sensing her unease, slipped an arm secretly around her waist. She smiled at him, grateful for the reassurance

The door chimed merrily as they entered the pub, and were met by the sight of Grace, and a vast quantity of third-or-fourth-year (she guessed their ages, not entirely sure) friends of Dom's, including the pretty French Celine Xavier, who she remembered Alden's little brother had been very interested in. She also spied Beth Menzies – who she suspected had only turned up for the drinks, though she was now very friendly with Grace, and getting on well with Alden – and Luke Glasscoe...

She wasn't quite sure why he was there, but there you go.

"Oh, I'm so nervous!" Grace rushed at her, flapping her hands. "I haven't spoken to him, and I don't know if he'll even remember me, and I want to make a good impression, but I'll probably forget and end up asking him if he met God... oh, help..."

"Don't worry," Ginny laughed weakly. "At least you weren't the one who nearly got him killed."

Grace's eyes widened with understanding. "Oh. Well. He won't hold a grudge, if he's anything like Alden." She looked up at Tom. "Hi."

He didn't answer. He seemed to be concentrating on breathing.

The brunette looked questioningly at Ginny, but she shook her head. Taking the hint, Grace changed the subject; she looked down at Ginny's dress and shrieked. "You wore it! I thought you'd like it."

Ginny held out the skirt of her dress. "I love it, it's really nice."

“Yay.” Grace smiled, but then, looking over her shoulder, her expression faltered. She leaned towards Ginny, lowering her voice. “I was going to ask... what’s Luke doing here?”

“I do not know.”

He was standing in the corner of the room, alone, and clearly out of place, though his twenty-four-seven confidence and ease in every situation made him not appear awkward. He was staring across the room – the look in his eyes was bewildering and strange. It was a sort of frustration, anger, intensity.

Ginny followed his gaze.

Beth Menzies.

She was allowed no more time to think on it, or to inform Grace, because then the doors opened again, chiming. She turned to see Mr. and Mrs. Philips, and Alden, pushing a wheelchair which held...

Her heart broke with sympathy and guilt.

He looked so tiny in that chair, smaller than ever; he seemed to have shrunk. The bandages on his head made him seem out of proportion, as though he could snap at any second. His ruddy skin was pale, making his dark eyes stand out, flickering blearily from person to person, struggling to comprehend.

He looked dead.

And he looked only marginally better than Tom.

And she – she alone – had killed them.

Tears involuntarily stung her hazel eyes, and, without waiting for further permission, poured unmercifully down her pale face.

“Hi,” Alden said quietly. He looked across everyone’s faces anxiously, lingering on Ginny’s tears. He didn’t look at Grace at all.

“I’m so sorry,” she choked out in the silence. No-one answered.

xxx

“I just wish that Beth and Luke – and Alden – and Grace - would all stop fighting for a split-second,” said Ginny tiredly as she and Tom moved down the hallway to their apartment door. “Can’t they just grow up?”

Tom didn’t answer. She’d become quite used to one-sided conversations, as now, talking took a lot of energy out of him. He’d been gaining a lot of strength since Marianne had gone with Eleanor, at the beginning, but was declining again. He still was pale, drawn, and lethargic.

The party – if it could be called that – was a disaster. Mr. and Mrs. Philips had taken Dominic home after only an hour, because it was all too much for him. The other guests had slowly declined into chaos shortly after – Luke and Beth began arguing, and Alden intervened, causing Luke to snap at him to piss off because, so quote, “you get in the way of everything! I let you have Grace, just leave me alone!” The world’s most awkward silence ensued before Alden said, “That means nothing if she doesn’t want me. You didn’t have to let her go.” Then Grace had got involved, screaming at Alden all his faults, hitting him; Beth yelling at everyone; Dominic’s friends terrified for their lives... she wished that she hadn’t gone...

She had known that it would be terrible, but had only gone so that she could apologise to Dom. It hadn’t mattered anyway, because he didn’t remember her, or the accident – or anything else.

Tom said, “We’ve got post.”

“What?” She reached the door and looked down. She was standing on a letter from a Muggle postman. “Oops.” She lifted her foot and picked it up.

Mr. T. M. Riddle, it was addressed to.

“For you,” she told him, and handed it to him. He turned it around her hands as she turned the key in the lock and opened it. Tom bent to pick up the post; she hung up the key on the peg and shrugged off her coat. She tossed it unthinkingly into the cupboard. She flicked the light-switch.

It didn't work.

Strange.

She headed through the darkness to hit the main living room light. She came out of the short hallway. She absent-mindedly patted the wall, running her fingers gently across the paint to try and find the switch-

Someone grabbed her from within the darkness.

Ginny screamed, twisting to try and break free, but the person was strong – “TOM!” - pinning her arms to her side and clamping a hand over her mouth – she bit down – screamed again –

And then the cold metal pressed tightly against her throat, and as she realised that it was a knife, she fell immediately silent.

She stood quiet, the only sound being the fierce, adrenaline-laced pounding of her heart on her ribs.

“Ginevra-” Tom was bellowing - the slam of a door shutting, footsteps rapidly approaching to check if she was okay. “Where are you – what's wrong?”

With a hand over her mouth, Ginny could do nothing but stand, shaking, feeling the ice of the blade against her skin, and wait for Tom to realise the sheer, agonising horror of what was finally happening.

“Ginevra?” he called warily into the darkness. There was the faint click of him turning the light-switch on, but nothing happened. Click. Click. Click. “Ginevra?”

At once, all the lights came on, flooding the room with blinding brightness, and Tom saw.

The instant that he laid eyes on Bernard's face, floating menacingly above her own (smug and taunting, she was sure), Tom's expression caught fire like a petroleum blaze – a savage snarl ripped out from deep within him – there was a torrent of words, profanities, threats, pouring out of his mouth uncontrollably - he came storming forwards-

"I wouldn't come any closer, if I were you," Bernard said quite calmly, taking a few steps backwards, dragging Ginny with him.

"And why the hell-"

"Tom," Ginny burst out, her voice shaking.

He stopped at the sound of her voice, and stared at her face. And then at Bernard. And then he actually looked at what was in front of him, and saw the bigger picture – he saw the knife. There was a visible reaction – he sucked in a great gasp of air, as though he'd been punched, and his mouth fell slightly open. "No..."

"I'm gettin' bored, Riddle," Bernard said, his voice loud and obnoxious in the stunned silence. "This ends now." Then he chuckled. "For me, at least. ...For you, it's only just beginnin'."

"Let go of her." His voice was flat, monotonous, as though he was still struggling to comprehend how rapidly their whole world had just turned upside. He was still staring at the knife.

Bernard just laughed. An absolute madman. "Now, where would be the sense in that?"

Tom twitched, as though trying to move forwards to protect her, but stopped by an invisible barrier – the burning need to save Ginny restrained by the painful knowledge that doing so would be her undoing. "I swear, Terby, if you hurt her-"

"Ya'll what?" Bernard sneered. "Ya'll kill me? Silly, naive Riddle; by the time ya reached me, it'd be far too late." He sighed. "You know, I

was a little disappointed when I realised that ya'd taken your daughter to safety. That would have made this so much better..." He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I'll still have my fun – 'cause thankfully, your wife is fool enough to waltz into a snake-pit without a sword. Anyway, this is probably better. Everyone knows you didn't want that baby."

"That's not true," Tom said quickly.

"It doesn't matter what you say," Bernard scoffed. "I know the truth, and you know the truth. Now... it's time to play."

Tears stabbed the corners of Ginny's eyes. She knew Bernard. She knew how determined he was in everything that he did. And she knew that he would never give up. This had to end now, and she had known for a long time that this was how it was going to end.

Her death.

Tom's demise.

She had only ever been a tool. To think she had been proud enough to believe that she was worth enough to be kept safe. Her only part in this plan was to destroy Tom with her own destruction.

"Why are you doing this?" Tom asked. His voice, always so level, so emotionless, was shaking. It was more than anger. It was a scorching, destructive, barely controllable rage – and possessive jealousy – and pain. Ginny had never seen his face so dark.

"I've been through this before," said Bernard irritably, "and I don't like repeatin' myself. You killed my sister, you filthy-"

"I'M DYING ANYWAY!" Tom unexpectedly roared.

Ginny froze.

"Promise." She sat back and stared at him, her eyes wide. "Promise me. And make me actually believe you."

He sighed. "What would be the point in-"

Ginny's voice cracked. "Please," she whispered.

His head bowed in the shadows. "I won't die," he said, and, for all of his bravado and this-is-stupid talk, his voice was strangely subdued. "Is that enough?"

Bernard, his arms around her, stopped dead as well.

"What?"

Tom seemed to have withdrawn into himself. "I am dying anyway," he repeated slowly. He was trembling noticeably – and avoiding her eyes, she realised. He remembered his promise. Even when he had made it, had he been lying? Had he known along that he wasn't going to make it?

"...I don't believe ya."

Ginny could not see anything of Bernard – she couldn't even tilt her head down to see his hands on her throat and elbow due to the knife forcing her chin up – but she could hear an uncertainty in his voice.

"Read my memories, my head; whatever it is that you do," Tom said quietly. "I'm telling you the truth. I've been dying since August. ...I'm not going to last much longer."

"Tom..." she whispered brokenly, tears spilling down her cheeks.

He didn't look at her.

There was a moment's silence.

Read his mind, Ginny begged silently of her captor. Read him, find out – find out that it's a lie. It's not true. It's-

"You're dying," Bernard said. There was a combination of awe and disgust in his voice.

Ginny broke.

He nodded curtly, his lips pressed into a thin line. "Just leave her out of this."

"Whatever you want. I jus' recommend ya look at it this way – I could kill her now, in front of ya, and make it quick 'n painless..." Bernard snorted with derisive laughter. "Face it, ya wouldn' last long without her even if ya were healthy."

Tom's face twisted with pain. Pale as ever, pinched with helplessness, he looked as though he was going to be sick.

"I can keep Ginny safe," Tom said quietly to Fionn.

No, he couldn't. There was no escaping this nightmare. There was no waking up the split-second before the worst. There was no comfort in a lack of reality. There was just the darkness.

"Or..." Bernard added, drawing the word out, long and slow, like toffee. "Or I could wait until after you're gone... and then attack. And then who would help her? Who would rescue her?" Bernard reached up a hand and squeezed her cheeks, the flat edge of the knife pressed cold against her face. She flinched and tried to snap her head away from him, but he held on tight. "Who would hear her screams?"

The knife cut tighter against her skin, and she gave an involuntary whimper – she hated herself for it; she knew it was exactly what Bernard wanted. Tom's jaw tightened at the noise, his eyes flaring.

"You see," Bernard said coolly, "if you chose for it to happen now, I would manage to restrain myself from a little thing called..."

He bent low, his lips close to her ears. And whispered:

"Torture."

Tom shuddered, barely stopping himself from attacking. Every muscle in his body was tensed. His lip curled back from his teeth. "You wouldn't dare," he growled, his voice low and threatening.

Bernard shrugged. "It's your choice, Riddle," he said. "I'm jus' sayin'... if ya weren' there to stop me, I might not be able to resist. I might..." his voice trailed off, and, deliberately slowly to wreck Tom, he slipped his hand intimately across her abdomen. "...indulge myself."

This was too much for Tom.

"Don't touch her," he snarled, dragging his wand out of his pocket, pointing, snarling, advancing-

"Tom, don't!" she cried desperately-

"Get back."

Ginny gasped as the knife returned to its previous position at her throat – and he cut into her skin, drawing a trickle of blood that slowly dripped to stain her white shirt.

Tom jerked to a halt, breathing laboured, staring in horror at the bright redness of it against her pale skin. He was shaking.

"C'mon on, now. Play nicely. Get back." Bernard took a few more steps back, pulling his hostage with him, his grip crushing the air out of her. "Temper, temper." He shook his head, tutting. He peered at Ginny smugly, stroking her mussed hair out of her face. "We wouldn't want Freckles here to have an accident before we made our decision, would we?"

"I said don't touch her."

"Do you see the blood?" Bernard asked, his voice lethal with poison. "See how nice 'n' red it is? How much d'ya think it's gonna take to kill her?"

This seemed to cut Tom down and destroy him.

The four stages of bargain. One: despair.

“Don’t...” Tom groaned, raking a hand roughly backwards through his hair. The expression on his face was pure agony. “Look at me, Terby. Look at me! Is this not enough?”

“It wasn’ enough for you,” Bernard said icily. “It wasn’ enough for Georgiana, my sister.”

Two: anger.

“Why her?” Tom bellowed. “It’s me you want revenge on – just let her go. You can kill me – I don’t care – you can torture me – whatever you want – just not – her. This is the most painful thing you could possibly put me through.”

“Exactly.” The younger Slytherin’s voice was soft. “Dontcha see? That’s exactly why I’m doin’ it.”

Three: aggression.

“What you don’t seem to realise, though,” Tom snarled, “is just how much taller – how much stronger – and how much more competent – I am than you. Every physical fight has ended with your life in my hands, and I have let you go. Can you not do the same? Because I warn you – if you hurt her, I will rip – you – into - pieces.”

“...I don’ care.” Bernard seemed very pleased with this. “That’s the best part. I don’ give a damn for all your threats and warnin’s, ‘cause when it comes down to it, I don’ care whether I live or die. My life is worth nothin’. I would end it myself after this, anyway. Besides... it would be worth it if the last thing I ever saw was your expression when I tear her apart.”

Finally, four: ...begging.

“No - please-”

“Bernard-” Ginny choked out. “Please-” She wanted to say ‘calm down’ but she didn’t think that would bode well. “Just – please – don’t-”

In response, Bernard Terby simply laughed.

"You don't have to do this," she attempted to reason through her tears. "You could do anything you want with your life – anything – and – and instead – you're – please – don't-"

"You're right, ya know," he said. "I can do whatever the hell I want. 'N' ya know what I want? ...This." He laughed again. "My life is worth nothin' anymore. This is what I've come down to. This is my only purpose. Now tell her she's gonna be okay," Bernard demanded. "Tell her."

"What?"

"Look into her eyes and tell her that's it's gonna be alright, that you're gonna save her... that you're not gonna let bad ole' Terby hurt her." While he had previously been smug, mocking, and calm, now Bernard's voice was nothing but ice. "Lie."

"Why?" Tom shouted. "Nothing I say will have any effect – you're not going to let her go – you're not going to protect her-"

"I know that. And that's what makes it so much more fun."

"I won't lie," Tom choked out, his words tight and strained in his throat.

"Yes, you will. Now tell her!"

The knife cut slightly deeper, fresh blood spilling down Ginny's throat. She coughed and spluttered, desperately trying to keep afloat in a sea of her own death, her lungs running out of air from Bernard's hand forced against her windpipe.

"He's not going to hurt you!" Tom burst out, his eyes wide with panic. "I'm telling her – I'm telling her, Terby – please – don't! He's – he's not going to hurt you, I promise, I won't let him – you're going to be alright, honestly – because if he dares, I will tear every bone out of his body – I will tear out his stomach – I will shred him – I will rip his jaw off and – and – then I'll – he won't, though – he won't hurt you-"

The knife cut deeper.

“No – I – I – what more do you want me to say?!” Tom’s voice was cracking, like his yells were on the verge of being just a hollow scream.

“Tell her you love her!”

“I do – I do – I love you.” Tom’s voice shook and gave out. “I love you – I never have, and never will love anything as desperately as I love you – and I don’t say it often enough – and I get too angry, and we fight too much, and I – I’m an imbecile – I am – and I love you – I wouldn’t ever need anything else in my life, ever, if I could only have you – please – and I’m sorry for everything I have ever done – and I love you – I do – since the moment I saw you – and I know that you hated me then – and if you have any sense, you would hate me even now – but I loved you, and I – I still – and – I-”

He buried his face in his hands, digging his fingernails into his skin, shoving his hands through his hair, clenching his fists.

“I love you,” Ginny whispered, tears scratching her vision, her lips shaking.

“PLEASE-” he screamed.

“Tell her not to do it! Tell her not to kill herself – tell her – tell her – say you love her, you’d do anything – say that you need her-” Bernard screamed, “-and just know, know, within yourself that it’s hopeless – and that when you break the enchantments, when you get the door open, it’ll be too late – know that you’ll find her swinging – and dead – and that you gave her everything – and then you have nothing – and you will never have anything – ever – AGAIN!”

And then a movement blurred her eyes – and then she knew – and she screamed, long and loud and devastating - and then a pain exploded uncontrollably through her stomach –

Bernard let go of the knife, so that the world could clearly see that it wasn’t a trick, it wasn’t a bluff, it was embedded in her side – a slower,

more painful, inevitable, unstoppable death - red was blossoming across the side of her crisp white shirt – he pushed her forwards, his hands clean of her, this whole fight ending now.

She wrapped her bloody fingers around the hilt and pulled it out sharply. Made the pain worse. Remembered too late that this would make the bleeding worse. She stumbled. She pressed her fingers against the red, against the stinging throb, tried to make it stop.

It wouldn't stop.

She knew. She knew what had to happen.

Feeling weaker.

She looked up, trying to find Tom's eyes. Trying to find him. Found him.

Tom was standing stock-still as he had been. Bent slightly, dented, as though he had been punched, as though he was the one who had been... stabbed. His mouth open. His eyes staring, unresponsive. Not breathing. Shocked. Disbelieving. Shocked.

Colours blurred. Blue, or maybe green. Purple blood on the floor.

Breathing difficult. In. Out. In. Out.

"Oh my God," gasped.

Feeling weaker.

Sharp pain numbing to a dead, dull throb, the ache of a fading bruise.

Tom's eyes. Shocked. Unmoving.

Black and white. Monochromatic. Pixellated.

Stark black against grey of blood dripping. Her hands covered. Pressing the wound. Not stopping.

Blurring.

Eyes. Shocked.

Feeling weaker.

Weaker.

The darkness.

She crumpled to her knees. And then she hit the floor.

xxx

Yes, I did steal some of the hostage dialogue from the film The Dark Knight. It's such a good film. I had too. Next update should be quick. I hope you forgot to breathe reading it. I know I did. (:

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Eternity

"I do – I do – I love you." Tom's voice shook and gave out. "I love you – I never have, and never will love anything as desperately as I love you – and I don't say it often enough – and I get too angry, and we fight too much, and I – I'm an imbecile – I am – and I love you – I wouldn't ever need anything else in my life, ever, if I could only have you – please – and I'm sorry for everything I have ever done – and I love you – I do – since the moment I saw you – and I know that you hated me then – and if you have any sense, you would hate me even now – but I loved you, and I – I still – and – I-"

He buried his face in his hands, digging his fingernails into his skin, shoving his hands through his hair, clenching his fists.

"I love you," Ginny whispered, tears scratching her vision, her lips shaking.

"PLEASE-" he screamed.

"Tell her not to do it! Tell her not to kill herself – tell her – tell her – say you love her, you'd do anything – say that you need her-" Bernard screamed, "-and just know, know, within yourself that it's hopeless – and that when you break the enchantments, when you get the door open, it'll be too late – know that you'll find her swinging – and dead – and that you gave her everything – and then you have nothing – and you will never have anything – ever – AGAIN!"

And then a movement blurred her eyes – and then she knew – and she screamed, long and loud and devastating - and then a pain exploded uncontrollably through her stomach – She pressed her fingers against the red, against the stinging throb, tried to make it stop. It wouldn't stop. She knew. She knew what had to happen. Tom was standing stock-still as he had been. Bent slightly, dented, as though he had been punched, as though he was the one who had been... stabbed. His mouth open. His eyes staring, unresponsive. Not breathing. Shocked. Disbelieving. Shocked.

Sharp pain numbing to a dead, dull throb, the ache of a fading bruise. Eyes. Shocked. Feeling weaker. Weaker. The darkness. She crumpled to her knees. And then she hit the floor.

xxx

Silence.

And then the longest, rawest, most anguished roar she had ever heard – no words, just a hollow, echoing scream that went on forever – seeming to shake the earth itself –

And then he was across the room, not to her, to Bernard, the sickening crunch and crack of bones, blood on the floor from his nose, his ears, a burst lip, shattered jaw cutting through skin- despite all his previous bravado, Bernard was crying out in fear as he attempted to retreat – he tripped over his own feet, hit the floor – and the smash, again and again, of his skull against the floor – blood – screaming-

Ginny was watching this exchange with wide, horrified eyes, blurry with pain. Lights shook and through the blood on the floor that her face was pressed into, she could see everything. She knew now what it was to see Tom's alter-ego take over fully – and then she received the shock of her life.

"Look at me," Tom screamed, and she realised that it was Tom – shuddering with effort, contorted with fury, but definitely himself. He was doing this on purpose. "Fucking LOOK AT ME!" He grabbed and twisted Bernard's broken face, holding it close to his. "Can you see me?" he hissed through his teeth, shaking violently.

"Fuck you," Bernard spat, determined to go out with one last jab-

"I want you to know before you die that this is me. This isn't something else. This isn't possession. Svengali. The devil. My stupid, fucking twin! THIS – IS – ME!"

And suddenly, somehow, he had Bernard's knife, slick with Ginny's blood, and thrust it down – Bernard cried as it pierced his chest – and again – Tom wasn't screaming anymore, he wasn't saying anything,

he was just stabbing, stabbing, blood everywhere, shaking – shaking now with sobs; broken, heart-wrenching, hysterical sobs – plunging the knife a tenth time, a twelfth time – “THIS IS ME!” he screamed – and she could see tears, real tears, streaming down his blood-splattered face for the first time she had ever known him – crying, really crying – as he murdered Bernard Terby, eighteen years old, deliberately.

Bernard had been silent for several minutes, his leg, at an odd angle, twitching with the severed nerves in his shin, while already dead.

And there was no more revenge that Tom could have. He could stab him as much as he wanted, but there was nothing else.

He clenched his bloody hands into fists, tightly, pressing his knuckles to his forehead hard, just kneeling over Bernard’s body, shaking. He yelled, “I don’t want-” in the silence, hurling the knife as far as he could – it bounced off the wall and embedded itself, bloody, in the sofa. He collapsed to the floor, breathing hard, skidding on his side away from the advancing pool of blood, digging his nails into his face – turned onto his back, shuddering, gasping for air, fighting for control. He was talking – to himself, to the voice in his head, she didn’t know-

“It was never enough,” he groaned. “I was never... I wasn’t...”

He rolled over, kneeling up, and vomited, shaking.

“Tom...” she tried. “Tom...”

He was clawing, raking his hands through his hair, curling up into a ball on the floor, his teeth tight together, and she had never seen him so completely and utterly destroyed.

“Tom...”

He froze solid, and then spun back to look at her, his eyes wide. “Ginny,” he gasped.

And he actually called her Ginny.

So fast that she didn't see him move and her mind doubted whether he'd in fact been beside her all along, he was crouching beside her – his hands hovering above her, shaking, as though he didn't know what to do – pick her up, hold her, but that would make it worse – trembling fingers brushing her cheeks, smearing blood across her skin. He slipped one hand carefully under her head, the other around her and under her upper back; he picked her up and held her very gently to him, as though terrified that she was going to shatter.

“How – how – you're-” he swallowed, hard, breathing laboured; pushing bloody hair out of her face with frantic fingers. “I thought – I thought you – but – oh my God – I just-”

“Tom,” she tried to explain. “I'm... I'm fine.”

“No – but – don't worry, you'll be okay – I'll... I'll get someone – you're alive – oh my God- a hospital – a doctor – someone – I don't – I – stay – stay – don't go – please-” he stammered brokenly. “I'm so sorry – I should have – I should have been able to – Ginevra – I-”

“I'm fine,” she insisted, using what air she could find in her strangle-choked windpipe to force her voice louder over his stuttering. “I... I played it up.”

He stopped talking and stared at her. “What?”

She took a deep breath and explained. “It wasn't... life-threatening. I realised... and I pretended... so he...”

Tom was just staring at her still, an unfathomable expression frozen on his face. Then, slowly, he took a deep breath; he freed the hand from behind her back and dragged it down his face.

“Oh my God,” he said shakily, barely audible. “Oh my God – oh my fuckingGOD!” he shouted, ripping his hand away from his face. “You fucking – you – do you have any fucking idea – you-” His face was unrecognisable with the emotion – fury, pain, relief, frustration, mortification, happiness – all boiling over in his face at once.

“I’m sorry,” she said, her voice tiny with weakness, and even smaller with comparison to Tom’s yelling. “I had to... if he realised... then it wouldn’t have worked... and you... he’d...”

For the first time, Tom seemed to notice the shaky pauses in her words, and the heaving rapidity of her breathing. He looked frightened. He eased Ginny’s dress up to see the wound on her side. She flinched as he did so, but bit her lip hard. She looked down at saw just a bloody mess.

“You said it wasn’t deep,” he whispered.

“No,” she grunted, swallowing past the swollen lump that was her throat, “I said... it wasn’t... life-threatening.”

He glared at her. “This looks rather bloody life-threatening to me, don’t you think?” he snapped. “Try telling the truth, and God knows you might live longer!”

She set her jaw stubbornly, but said, “Grace... go to... her house... not to the hospital...” She struggled to get the words out, gasping air in. “I... I...”

Tom didn’t listen to anymore. He kissed her fiercely, pressing his lips tightly to hers, as though worried that he wasn’t going to get another chance, that she might not make it there. His mouth tasted of blood and stomach acid. Then he was sweeping her up – she bit back the cry of pain – and headed towards the fireplace – decided against it – delved awkwardly into his pocket, pointed his wand at Bernard and unflinchingly Disillusioned the body – shoved through the front door, moving quickly around the corner, alarming an old woman-

Crack.

It was half-term, and Grace would, hopefully, be at home, instead of at university. Ginny hoped that she wasn’t out somewhere. Her thoughts were losing coherency, and with every jostling step, pain ripped through her.

They appeared on the doorstep of the Hartwin residence, and Tom slammed the doorbell with his elbow. The harsh movement knocked Ginny's knee on the brickwork beside the door, but it was nothing compared to everything else. She didn't even notice.

Grace opened the door, and her face twisted. "OH MY GOD!" she screamed.

Tom didn't speak, didn't ask permission, just pushed past her into the hallway and kicked the door shut behind him. Once inside, he didn't bother with long explanations or trying to compose himself. It was just: "Please."

"Is she even still alive?" Grace shrieked, still staring in horror, her blue eyes flashing over every sight – Tom, shaking, covered in blood, dripping still-hot from his pale, haunted face; Ginny, limp in his arms, blood consuming her slowly. "What happened? Oh my God – oh my God." She grabbed a handful of her wavy hair. "Um – um – think, Hartwin, think – um – the dining room. This way."

They wound through the labyrinthine hallways of Grace's expensive house, trying not to drip blood on the plush carpets and polished floorboards, but dripping anyway. Ginny tried to remember distraction techniques. She stared at Tom's face, above her, but then he looked down, and his dark eyes were so contorted with agony that she was immediately remembered of everything that had happened.

Grace pushed the dining table to the side of the room, and whipped her wand out. She focused, squeezing her eyes shut, and waved it – to no effect. "Damnit," she muttered, trying again, and again. Her hand was shaking. One more time.

"Can't you do it any fucking faster?" Tom growled.

"I'm trying, for Merlin's sake!" she snapped at him. "It's hard to concentrate with you standing there, looking, I'm sorry to say, very much like you just assaulted and tried to kill-"

"Just help her!" he snarled.

“Okay, okay – um...” She grabbed a tablecloth from a cupboard on the far wall and threw it over the dining table. “Put her down on the dining table and get her dress off. If any material at all is stuck to the wound, then cut the dress away. I’ll be right back.”

Grace disappeared from the room as Tom carefully eased the bloody clothing off, panic clear in his face with every one of Ginny’s flinches, cringes and gasps of pain. Every three seconds it was “are you alright” or “don’t worry” or “it’s going to be okay” or, most commonly, “I’m so sorry”. Then Grace was back, pushing him out of the way and carefully laying out various implements. Ginny couldn’t see. She didn’t want to.

“Local anaesthetic on three,” Grace said. “You ready?”

Ginny nodded. She knew this trick. Grace would do it on two, so that she wouldn’t be expecting it. Clearly Grace had forgot that she had done this before-

“One-”

Stab.

She cried out.

“Sorry,” Grace mumbled, and then, not even waiting for the anaesthetic to set in, she was handing Tom something, telling him something, doing something – there was pressure on her side, burning; something cool sliding smoothly across her scorching skin. “How are you doing?” Grace kept asking her.

And she would groan back: “I’ve had a baby, and this is nothing compared to that. I’m fine.” A lie. Giving birth had been a blinding pain for a short time, but this was a slow ache, building, draining her. It was as though she could feel her life, her soul, her very essence seeping away from her as she bled. She was losing blood. She was getting weaker.

“It’s not stopping,” Tom muttered – quiet, out of the corner of his mouth, so he thought Ginny wouldn’t hear, but she could pick out the

combination of dread and desperation in his voice. She knew exactly what he meant by 'it'.

"Shit, how bloody deep is this?" Grace said to herself, and then she talking under her breath. And then: "Okay. Right."

"Whaz go'n'on?" Ginny slurred.

"You're okay," Tom said to her, his attention immediately distracted from the task he was doing. "Don't worry, Ginevra. You're... you are fine." He sounded as though he was convincing himself as much as her.

She felt really strange. "An'... an' Graysh... I think... you put t'much anshthetik..."

Tom's eyes were wide. "What does that mean?" he demanded. "What happens if you give her too much? What have you done, Hartwin?"

"Calm down," Grace said, perfectly tranquil now, once she'd stopped panicking. "It means that she'll feel it even less than she should do. Admittedly, she'll be blurry and feel like mush for a while, but that can't be helped." She eyed Tom. "Unless you want her to feel the pain?"

"No," Tom said quickly.

"Good."

The fact about not feeling the pain was not strictly true. Maybe 1960's anaesthetic wasn't as good as modern anaesthetic. She was tired, but she could still feel the pain. The instant that the knife went in, she went rigid and blacked out.

xxx

She was woken by touch. A hand, around her hand, the thumb sweeping softly across the pale skin on the backs of her knuckles in a repeated, soothing motion. She struggled up from a deep sea of tar,

weights attached to her ankles. It hurt. And, in the end, it was the pain that knocked her out, and the pain that brought her back.

Hazel eyes opened with a thick film of anaesthetic-induced sleep, blinking confusedly again and again to try and understand.

Ginny looked up at Tom. His face was a smeary reddish-brown, as though he had tried to rub the blood off without use of a mirror and had missed great patches of it. His hair stuck up at odd angles, giving away his nervous habit of pushing his hands through his hair. He was still trembling. Their eyes crashed and burned.

"I am so sorry," he said – maybe whispered – maybe it was too quiet for her blurry hearing – but she didn't hear him say it. She just saw the words mouthed, and him duck his head, ashamed, maybe horrified, maybe in pain. She'd forgotten his illness. She could only imagine how much it must have taken to get her here. She wondered how many days, weeks, months, the effort had taken off his life.

She tried to speak but her tongue was still too heavy.

He stared at her. There was a sad humour in his expression. "Do you think you're well enough for me to hold you and never let you go?" he asked softly, smiling ruefully.

Ginny swallowed the barrier between her and speech. "I th'nk I've t'stay on th'table," she mumbled.

"Well." And then he surprised her by standing, leaning over her, and lying down beside her, balancing precariously on the edge of the table. He surprised her again then by chuckling quietly. "I think I'm rather too large for this table."

"I th'nk so too," she protested. "If y'fall off, y'll get hurt." Her voice was coming back, waking up.

He raised one eyebrow. "I'm not so fragile."

She didn't answer. She knew that he was lying. She didn't know if he remembered yelling, 'I'm dying anyway' for everyone to hear.

Realising that he was clearly not going to get off the table, she carefully shifted over on the large dining table to give him more room, and then, once she was quite certain that he was safely positioned, turned her head to bury into his chest. Curling up beside him hurt her side, but it had seemed so impossible, less than a few hours ago, that they could survive this; that they could have this. She didn't care for the pain.

Tom put his arms around her as best he could, and held her to him as tightly as was possible without hurting her. At that moment she didn't care for the smell of blood, or the awkwardness of being on her best friend's dining table, and she pressed the side of her face into him, breathing in how unfathomably lucky she could be. Just being here.

"Is it all really, finally over?" she whispered, unable to believe it.

He nodded, his cheek sliding across her ratted, dirty hair. "It's all over," he said gently. Then he hesitated, before tentatively telling her. "Ginevra – Ginny – he's... he's dead."

Ginny swallowed. "I know." She bit her lip. "I saw."

Abruptly, he tensed, as though this was something he had dreaded, a nightmare come true. His words came out in a rush. "I know, it was – I'm – I'm sorry – I didn't mean for you to – I just – I couldn't – and I thought – I thought you were – and if you weren't alive – and I just wanted-" He was struggling so hard for words that it seemed to hurt him, desperately trying to find justification in his actions.

"It's fine," she told him, twisting her face up to look into his. "Honestly... I wouldn't have done any different."

He seemed torn between being shocked and relieved. And then frustrated, angry. "That doesn't make it any better!" he said fiercely, though his voice remained low. "Don't you see that's hypothetical – and – and this isn't. It's real, and... and what I did... was..." He trailed off, struggling again.

She lifted a bloody finger and put it to his lips. "Sssh," she whispered. And she stretched up as best she could to kiss his lower lip. At the soft insistence of her mouth against his, his lips parted shakily, his breath trembling across her face; a long pause stretching on and on, where he seemed to be struggling to breathe properly. Then there was the rush of his blood through his skin, fleeting, pressed close enough to her that she could feel every stagger and stumble of his heart, and he crushed his lips to hers. There was a burning desperation in the way he kissed her, as though he was painfully aware that he'd come a scratch, an eighth of an angle, away from losing her; that he wasn't far from being lost himself; and that there was no accounting for ever getting something like this again.

Footsteps alerted her, vaguely, in the back of her mind, that someone had appeared in the room. And then, Jacob's voice, sarcastically humorous: "I hope you two are aware that we do actually eat on that table."

An embarrassed flush came up faintly in Ginny's cheeks. It was strange, knowing that she'd lost enough blood to not be able to blush properly anymore. Knowing how Tom felt about public displays of affection, or anything deeper than a hug or clasped hands in front of other people, she broke away first; she had only drawn back less than a millimetre, probably, from Tom's lips before he curled forward to reclaim her as his – kissing the corner of her mouth, her bottom lip, her teeth-

"Okay, break it up," said Grace, coming back into the room. Her tone suggested annoyance, and Ginny realised with some guilt that they had basically stormed her house without warning and demanded everything of her. The redhead kissed Tom lightly once – again, and maybe again – and then pulled away, looking up at Grace. There was a strange look on her face. A lot of emotions crossed it; annoyance, recovering shock, relief, pride, and, foremost, a stinging, biting regret. Her nose suddenly crumpled. "Ew. No offence, but it stinks." She eyed Tom, blood-stained. "Feel free to use the shower facilities at any time."

"I'll manage." He sat up, swinging his legs to dangle over the edge of the table. His expression was hard, and he kept his hand on Ginny's.

“No, you won’t,” Grace said, shaking her head. “Seriously. Go.”

This time, Tom didn’t even answer. He simply stared at Grace through narrowed eyes, not moving an inch.

Grace huffed a sigh. “For God’s sake, she’s not going to be abducted while you get the blood off, Riddle.” She folded her arms. “Jacob is intimidating enough for any intruder who comes in, and I can fight as well as any man-”

“So could she!” Tom snapped, standing. “It didn’t help her much, did it?”

“-and we have a vast array of kitchen knives at our disposal, about five metres away-” Grace continued, as though she hadn’t heard him.

“As much at their disposal as yours,” Tom retorted.

“-and, Merlin, you’re stubborn! Just shut up and go clean up! Who do you think is going to come in anyway?” Grace said angrily. “We live in the middle of nowhere. We have security on the outside perimeter that would warn us as soon as anyone crossed over. That would still give up three-quarters of a kilometre to get her safe, and warn you, and get you out of here, or whatever else you could possibly want.”

“Tom,” Ginny said, trying to implore him not to be difficult. “I’ll be fine.”

He pretended that she hadn’t even spoken.

Grace rolled her eyes, and then there was a soft ring, and she gasped. She flew out of the room.

Jacob folded his arms, leaning lazily against the wall. “My mum likes you right now,” he said calmly, “but if she sees the state of you, or, I may add, what you’ve done to her tablecloth, you will never be coming back here again. I seriously suggest you hide yourselves while we clean up.”

The brunette girl returned, all business. “Right. Newsflash – mum’s on her way home, and this is going to be hard to explain.” She looked pointedly at Tom. “That was the perimeter bell. That means we have fifteen whole minutes to get ready. Fifteen minutes.”

His jaw was set, and Ginny knew what that meant. She let her head fall back onto the pillow, resigned.

“Okay, so here’s what’s going to happen. Tom, you’re going to go and take a freaking shower. You both need to get off the table so I can wash the tablecloth.”

“What’s wrong with a Vanishing spell?” Tom said - just to be annoying.

“That doesn’t get rid of the smell. Trust me, if it did, you’d be long gone.” Grace took a deep breath and turned to her brother. “Jake, you carry Ginny up to one of the guest rooms... er, the Quartz Room. It’s pale in there, we’ll notice quickly if she starts bleeding again.”

“I’ll do that,” Tom said automatically. His other hand – the free one, not already holding Ginny’s hand – flew with startling swiftness to rest lightly on her stomach, claiming her. He glared at Jacob, who had advanced one step towards her; as though he was daring Grace’s brother to take a single pace closer.

Jacob understandably took a step back and held his hands up in surrender. “Not going there.”

“I don’t mind,” Ginny said. Just putting it out there for general awareness.

“I do,” Tom growled. He carefully slipped his arms around her; one around her shoulders, the other under her knees. He lifted her as though she was made of glass, tucking her gently against him, and then stepped towards the door. “Where to?” he asked quietly, though there was a triumphant defiance, soft in his tone, because he knew that he’d won his stubborn little argument.

Grace gave him a disapproving look. “Jake, you take him up there. I’ll fix the tablecloth.”

The Quartz room seemed ridiculously far to Ginny. It was a blur of jostling footsteps, awkward so as not to bump her – long corridors, with lots of carpets and furniture – the rise and fall of Tom's chest against her ear, his heartbeat faint beneath it. Then there was a plump bed that she sank into far too happily, far too tiredly. She counted eight seconds before the sheer fluffiness of it made her eyes heavy.

"Don't sit down!" Jacob yelled, flinging a hand forwards. He gave Tom a warning look. "I'm serious. If you want to stay in this room, you either don't touch anything – that includes her – or go have a shower. Now."

Tom stood stock-still beside the bed, his eyes flashing from Jacob to Ginny. Considering his options. His lips pressed into a thin line. "Fine." He looked sharply at Jacob. "You stay here."

"Yeah, yeah." Jacob dismissed him with a sweep of his hand. "Whatever. It's the fourth door on the left. Don't use the blue towel – that's Grace's, and she'll go ballistic. I'll get you some clothes or something." He didn't look particularly enthusiastic about this idea, but he was good-natured and was going along with it all.

As Tom disappeared, Jacob turned back to Ginny.

"Is he always like this?"

She sighed. "Sometimes."

"Ouch."

"He means well," she said, trying to defend him. "If he's being mean, it's only because he's trying to look after me."

Jacob laughed. "If it's possible to love anyone to death, you'll be the world's first victim."

"I'd rather that than a stab wound," she said honestly.

“True. How’s the hole in your stomach faring?”

“It’s alright.” She looked down at her stomach and gingerly poked it. It was strange – a combination of Muggle medicine and magic Healing. It was held together by stitches, and then Healed over. She poked it again. “Ow.”

“Don’t poke it, stupid.” Jacob muttered. He glanced out the window for a second, and then said thoughtfully, “I’m going to go and get your over-reactive husband some clothes. I’ll be back in a minute. Don’t die while I’m gone, or I’m in trouble.”

“I’ll try.” She added, “Oh! Can you get me some, too?” She blushed again – still, the colouring was ineffective and feeble – as she realised that she still had no dress.

“A-okay.” He gave her a thumbs-up and then left the room. He reappeared a few moments of boredom later, and threw a dressing-gown at her. He paused in the doorway, his clothes for Tom in hand. “Er. Do you need, um, help – with the, er-”

“No, it’s okay.” She spared him the embarrassment. “Go and give Tom his stuff.”

“Right.”

She awkwardly shifted the dressing-gown around her, and as she did so, the warmth of its material flooded through her; she realised that she was in fact rather cold. She tied the red towelling tight around her – the colour of which she suspected didn’t compliment her colouring – and then decided to attempt to get under the covers.

Then Jacob was back, sinking into a fluffy armchair. “You still alive?”

She grinned wearily. “I think so.”

“That’s okay, then.” He crossed his arms loosely across his chest and tipped his chair back on two legs, clearly not terribly entertained by the idea of babysitting Ginny until her panicky husband returned.

It was a further five minutes until said panicky husband re-entered the room – five minutes of huffs and sighs on Jacob's behalf, and a sleepy silence on Ginny's – and, much to her amusement, he was dressed in clothes that were so typically Jacob Hartwin... and so atypically Tom. The Heir of Slytherin, needless to say, didn't look particularly comfortable in the pink flowered shirt and expensive cream trousers. However, from pulling uncomfortably at the collar as he came through the doorway, and ruffling the damp hair on the back of his head, he didn't say anything to indicate that he didn't appreciate the clothes.

Jacob immediately got up from his chair as Tom came over. "Well, she's alive," he said, and there was a hint of sarcasm as he added, "You owe me, though, for all the masses of terrorists and serial killers and ginger-fetishes and crazy ninja pirates I had to defend her from in the ten minutes you were gone."

Tom ignored this completely and stood stiffly at the bedside as Jacob left. Even once they were alone together, he didn't take the seat, nor did he relax. His shoulders were high and tense, his hands balled into fists tight by his sides. He stared at her, almost as though he couldn't really see her. Now that the blood and dirt was cleared from his skin, it was clear how stony pale he was, veins like ice webbing faintly underneath the snow.

"Are you okay? You weren't like this ten minutes ago," Ginny commented. "Did you sniff the soap, or something?"

"No," he said quietly, his voice low, and she was alarmed by how it burned with anger. "I saw the blood. I saw how much blood there was – how much it had taken me to kill him – how much-" He was shaking violently, breathing as though he'd sprinted a marathon. She could see a darkness in his eyes that did not bode well; a darkness that she could see was causing deep, slicing pain within himself.

"It's okay," she said, trying to calm him down.

He was still on a rant of his own. "I prolonged it – made it longer – drew it out – made it agonising – and it wasn't enough. It wasn't fucking enough – I - I just – I said – he – I said he wouldn't hurt you –

I promised – I swore-”He dragged a long breath in between his teeth, clenched together.

“I’ve broken promises before, too-”

“This is different,” he snarled, and then swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes shut. Slowly, he forced himself to open them. “This – is – not – the – same. This – this isn’t – ‘I promise not to look at my birthday present before my birthday’ – or – or ‘I promise never to cook such a disaster meal again’ – or – or anything! This was ‘I promise not to let him stab you’ – and – and I said – and I couldn’t-”

“I didn’t die, though,” she pointed out cheerfully.

“‘You didn’t die, though?’” he bellowed. “What am I supposed to say to that? Well, luckily, he decided to stab you in the stomach instead just slashing your throat – luckily, he decided to go for your organs and drag your death out longer – luckily, he decided to torture me instead with knowing that you had died in AGONY – luckily, he was angry enough to lose himself in emotions and stab you wrong – LUCKILY, he missed your liver by less than a fuckingcentimetre – I’m sorry, but that is too close for comfort!”

Tears stung her eyes. She hadn’t realised that it had been such a close call. She had simply assumed that because she wasn’t already dead, she would be fine.

Tom shoved a hand roughly backwards through his hair, wheeling away and walking a few steps before turning to round on her again. “I have come close to losing you before,” he said, his voice just a growl of pain. “I have seen you collapse of malnutrition. I have seen you crumple to the floor with a heart I broke. I have seen you being kicked on the floor – I have seen you put a loaded gun to your head and pull the trigger - I have seen you bleeding internally as something I created tried to rip its way out of you – and none of those were even close to what happened today. Just... just standing there, watching you bleed, whimper, cry, with a knife to your throat – listening to threats of – of – of what he would do – of a choice I couldn’t make – because of something that was entirely my fault. Something that you had nothing to do with. And yet it wasn’t me who held hostage; it

wasn't me who was attacked – it was you who I had to watch hit the floor with a slash in your stomach. And after I promised that I wouldn't let him hurt you – and all I could do was watch – and there was nothing I could do but scream – do everything he said – let him win - and I promised-”

“You kept your side of the bargain, though,” she said, wishing she could reach out to him and hold him and make everything all better.

“I did,” Tom said fiercely. “And – and I would do it again – and again – and – I want to do it again – I could – I could-” He was wild with fury, not even making sense anymore. Being honest, there was a part of her that was slightly frightened as he confessed how desperately he wanted to kill someone a hundred times over... but it was for her. It was all for her.

It was only ever for her.

Unable to stand anymore, Ginny pushed back the covers to try and stagger blearily to him, but as she stood, a pain shot sharply through her side; she stumbled and fell, the floor rushing up to meet her – and then he caught her, as he always did, and steadied her. She leaned heavily against him, her eyes closed to block out the hurt in her stomach, and so was startled when the ground disappeared beneath her feet. Her eyes flew open, but found that she was already travelling across the room, his arms looped carefully around her to support her. She was up against his shoulder, her toes not even skimming the floor.

Then she was in the comfort of the ridiculously soft bed, sinking down into a heaven of goose-feathers or swan-feathers, Tom leaning over her, one hand still at the small of her back, leaning across her onto one elbow so that he wouldn't fall on her and hurt her. She reached up a hand to his face; he trembled beneath her fingers as they skimmed his jaw, his cheeks, his lips, and in that moment he was the fragile one, the shaky one who could shatter like precious china. “Please don't die,” she whispered.

He didn't speak. He didn't deny it, nor did he accept it. He just stared at her, blinking, with the most heart-breaking expression on his face.

It was the inevitability in that expression, the surrender in every inch of his body, the agony in the never-ending eyes that he couldn't always be there to hold her and protect her and make sure that nothing hurt her and make her smile when she was crying and make her happy - that made her break down, finally, the tears pouring down her face.

She reached up to twine her arms tightly around him, burying her face into his neck, dampening Jacob's shirt with her tears. And they lay like that, pressed warmly together, for what they imagined was eternity.

xxx

Nyaww. There. I'm a nice person. I wouldn't dare kill Ginny. I love her too much. Tom, on the other hand... (:

Chapter Forty: The List

Sharp pain numbing to a dead, dull throb, the ache of a fading bruise. Eyes. Shocked. Feeling weaker. Weaker. The darkness. She crumpled to her knees. And then she hit the floor.

And suddenly, somehow, he had Bernard's knife, slick with Ginny's blood, and thrust it down – Bernard cried as it pierced his chest – and again – Tom wasn't screaming anymore, he wasn't saying anything, he was just stabbing, stabbing, blood everywhere, shaking – shaking now with sobs; broken, heart-wrenching, hysterical sobs – plunging the knife a tenth time, a twelfth time – "THIS IS ME!" he screamed – and she could see tears, real tears, streaming down his blood-splattered face for the first time she had ever known him – crying, really crying – as he murdered Bernard Terby, eighteen years old, deliberately.

"I'm fine," she insisted, using what air she could find in her strangle-choked windpipe to force her voice louder over his stuttering. "I... I played it up." She took a deep breath and explained. "It wasn't... life-threatening. I realised... and I pretended... so he..."

Tom shoved a hand roughly backwards through his hair, wheeling away and walking a few steps before turning to round on her again. "I have come close to losing you before," he said, his voice just a growl of pain. "I have seen you collapse of malnutrition. I have seen you crumple to the floor with a heart I broke. I have seen you being kicked on the floor – I have seen you put a loaded gun to your head and pull the trigger - I have seen you bleeding internally as something I created tried to rip its way out of you – and none of those were even close to what happened today. Just... just standing there, watching you bleed, whimper, cry, with a knife to your throat – listening to threats of – of – of what he would do – of a choice I couldn't make – because of something that was entirely my fault. Something that you had nothing to do with. And yet it wasn't me who held hostage; it wasn't me who was attacked – it was you who I had to watch hit the floor with a slash in your stomach. And after I promised that I wouldn't let him hurt you – and all I could do was watch – and there was nothing I could do but scream – do everything he said – let him win - and I promised-"

Then she was in the comfort of the ridiculously soft bed, sinking down into a heaven of goose-feathers or swan-feathers, Tom leaning over her, one hand still at the small of her back, leaning across her onto one elbow so that he wouldn't fall on her and hurt her. She reached up a hand to his face; he trembled beneath her fingers as they skimmed his jaw, his cheeks, his lips, and in that moment he was the fragile one, the shaky one who could shatter like precious china. "Please don't die," she whispered. He didn't speak. He didn't deny it, nor did he accept it. He just stared at her, blinking, with the most heart-breaking expression on his face. It was the inevitability in that expression, the surrender in every inch of his body, the agony in the never-ending eyes that he couldn't always be there to hold her and protect her and make sure that nothing hurt her and make her smile when she was crying and make her happy - that made her break down, finally, the tears pouring down her face.

She reached up to twine her arms tightly around him, burying her face into his neck, dampening Jacob's shirt with her tears. And they lay like that, pressed warmly together, for what they imagined was eternity.

xxx

The Quartz Room was dark at night, no light coming through the curtains even though they were bright white, and there was a full moon outside. It was strange, being so close to her best friend, and yet isolated by metres and metres of corridor and expensive furniture. She had never stayed anywhere in the Hartwin other than sleeping in Grace's room. The messy simplicity of Grace's bedroom made it easy to forget how extravagant everything was everywhere else. The bed was large enough for about five people, and personal space was no problem, but Tom and Ginny tangled together in the middle, pressed close for comfort.

Ginny was staring silently, blankly, into the distance of the over-sized guest room, imagining that she could see shadows and shapes in the darkness. Every figure she saw, stark and black and invisible, made her think of the Grim Reaper, Death, Angelicus Mortus, the Styx

boatman – sometimes with wild, manic grins, sometimes watching solemnly, just... watching. Waiting.

Waiting like she was.

Tom's breathing beside her hitched; his arm withdrew from being wrapped around her, shifting backwards away from her. She automatically curled into the warm spot he had left behind, pressing her face into the crinkled material of his pillowcase. He sat up, the mattress giving under his weight, and she could see that he was used to the timing of this. He swung his legs down to the floor and crossed the room. In their tiny bedroom, he easily had enough time to reach the bathroom; here, in the vast expanse of carpet, he was only by the second bay window when he started coughing.

They started quiet, then built up slowly, hacking and tearing at his lungs until, as always, she was frightened that he would die now, here, in Grace's guest room of all places – until the sound of the tap running away the blood came to her ears, and she knew it that it was over, that she still had him, and that she still had yet to wait for the brain haemorrhaging.

He padded back quietly across the carpet and back to the bed; sinking into the softness of the mattress. He lay on his side and stared at her through the gloom, maybe watching her sleep, maybe listening to her breathe – and her breathing was too fast, too heavy, for sleep.

"Ginevra?" he asked softly.

She nodded, forgetting that he couldn't see.

"Are you awake?"

"Yeah." She shifted closer to him.

"Oh." He paused, as though he had not really anticipated her ever answering; he had thought her sleeping. "I apologise if I woke you up."

"It's fine," she said, and then proceeded to explain, "I was already awake."

Tom propped himself up on one elbow. "Why? Can you not sleep? What's wrong? Does your side hurt?" He reached through the darkness to find her, worried. "Do you want something?"

She stared at his silhouette, balanced precariously above her, perhaps shaking with the effort, she didn't know. She thought of the way his forehead would crease with concern and make his hair fall over his face, the way his eyes would search for her, the way his lips would part shakily, desperate for the right thing to say to make it all better, the way the strong profile of his pale jaw would tighten with the pain of knowing that something was hurting her. She thought of the honest truth.

"Do you know what I want?" she said quietly, and let out her overwhelming blunt honesty. "I want to have sex with you, right here in Grace's house, in her guest room, where her whole family can probably hear us and throw us out for inappropriate behaviour. I want to be thrown out. I want to feel alive. I want to go home. I want to get Marianne back. I want to hold her, and feed her, and put her to bed, and look after her. I want to tell Eleanor that she's my daughter and I don't care what happens between us because I – we – need her. I want her to learn to walk, and I want you to be there to see it. I want—" Her throat choked up. "I want her first word to be 'love', because there's so godamn much of it here, even if it's so hard to see. I want to send her to nursery school and worry about her all day. I want her to get in trouble. I want to teach her how to put her hair in a ponytail, and I want you to teach her to fight fierce so that she won't get bullied on the playground. I want both of us to send her off to Hogwarts when she's old enough, and I want to you to cry with me when we realise that we're not going to see her for a whole year – though of course you won't, but you'll want to. I want her to get a detention, and I want you to give that whole 'I'm very disappointed' in you speech, which I want you to practice so that she takes you seriously. I want her to fall in love with someone we completely disapprove of, but who loves her back with his all. I want her to run away with him, and I want to be worried sick. I want to run to you from the window with a notification in my hand saying that we have grandchildren. I want you to live

forever, and love forever, and then... and then I want to die with you with the best memories.”

There was a long silence, and because of the darkness, she couldn't see his reaction, or the emotions twisting his face as she knew they would.

She stared challengingly at him. “What do you want?”

For a moment, there was a nothing, and then, suddenly, startlingly, he found her – he shifted his weight to lean over her, crushing her lips beneath his, parting them, and, his voice raw with too many things to determine, in one rushed breath that belonged to both of them, said, “I want every fucking thing on your list.”

xxx

It was almost a week further that they stayed at the Hartwin house, due to the fact that there was the inconvenience of still having Bernard Terby's body Disillusioned in their living room, blood staining the floorboards – and Tom would not leave Ginny unattended to go and clear the mess up. She wasn't quite sure how he intended to 'restore order', as he so put it, but he swore that he would.

It was only when a vast crowd came to visit her and Grace – Alden, Luke, Louise, Will, Beth, Eleanor and Marianne – that he deemed it safe enough to leave her.

At first, she had been uncertain when she heard that Eleanor was bringing Marianne, due to Tom's still worsening condition. She had tried to pretend that she was unbothered, but he caught her worried glance. There had been a pregnant silence before he said tersely, “I just want to say now that no matter what... he may have said-” – there was no more need to ever even mention Bernard Terby's name again – “-the only reason I had ever been opposed to Marianne's birth was because of... what she could have been – and that I love her as much as any father should.”

Ginny stared at him, eyes wide. She didn't want to bring up the matter of his sickness again – even just thinking about it, without his

reactions, or seeing the painful hopelessness in his eyes, made her heart hurt.

She have to speak, it seemed. He knew what she was refraining from saying. "Don't think for a moment that Marianne killing me is going to stop me from seeing her." It was only when she flinched at the brutal choice of words that he seemed to realise that he could have been kinder in his phrasing. He tensed. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head, trying to shake away the hurting. "It's fine." She took a deep breath. "There. It doesn't matter. I didn't say anything, anyway, did I?"

The visitors came traipsing to the living room, where Ginny had been helped to (with much stumbling and support) so that she didn't have to feel so much like an invalid. The first to arrive was Alden, and she immediately realised why having him come wasn't a brilliant idea.

One: him, Grace and Luke in the same space never worked out.

Two: he knew about Tom's condition.

Three: he liked playing detective as much as she did, and therefore enjoyed jumping to conclusions.

She could see in his brown eyes as soon as he entered the room that he had it already worked out. Tom, for some unknown reason or another, killed people by accident, as far as he knew. Ginny had been stabbed in an alley. Tom had 'found' her and turned up to Grace's house covered in a lot more blood that would have been possible for simply carrying her. Tom had stayed with her, never letting her be alone – in case she told anyone that it had been her husband who had hurt her, perhaps.

Alden's eyes narrowed to lethal slits, and he stormed angrily across the room, making quick time for all that he had grown since they'd first met.

Seeing that there was going to be trouble, Ginny struggled to her feet to intervene. “Don’t!” she gasped, but pain overwhelmed her balance and she tripped. Tom grabbed her shoulders to keep her upright.

“Let go of her,” Alden growled.

“For God’s sake,” Ginny said, clenching her side in an effort to numb the shockwaves of pain sparking through her. “Alden, stop being so stupid. Trust me, I know exactly what’s going on in that big head of yours and it’s completely wrong.”

Tom noticed her grip. “Ginevra, are you okay? Do you need another Pain-Killing Spell? Water? Do you need more sugar?”

Some sugar would be nice.

“I’m fine.”

He stared at her, his permanent state of worry disbelieving every word she said. He shook his head and pushed her gently towards the sofa again. “Sit back down. I’ll take care of this.”

“No,” Alden challenged. “I want to talk to her.”

“Well, you can’t – she’s not well,” Tom said defensively.

“And whose fault is that?”

Tom’s anger swelled like a balloon. “What is that supposed to mean?” he snarled.

“Just calm down!” Ginny said angrily, stepping towards them again. “Both of you, just take a freakin’ chill-pill!”

Instantly, they both began to speak at once, raising their voices over the other until the general turn of the conversation was ARGUE ARGUE ARGUE, deafening and chaotic. It was impossible to understand anything.

“Shut up!” Ginny yelled. They both fell silent. She huffed heavily, crossing her arms. “God, being made Head Boy makes you think you know everything.”

Tom gave her a look of the wounded puppy who didn’t understand why he was being punished.

“Okay, well, you do know everything,” she amended to him.

Her husband’s face instead changed into a smug smirk. Alden glowered at him in response. She rolled her eyes. Men were so childish.

At that moment, Grace came into the room. She smiled faintly, awkwardly, at Alden, mumbling a quick ‘hello’ before averting her eyes. He, in return, simply stared at her. To avoid the pauses and hush, Ginny left Tom to either stand on his own, or try and force civil conversation with Grace, while she stumbled with Alden to a different corner of the room to explain, in hurried whispers, why his reasoning was totally ridiculous.

As always, he didn’t take kindly to being corrected, but accepted his fault, and nodded begrudgingly at Tom in what she supposed was an apology. Tom seemed to acknowledge this, but didn’t say anything.

It was a further ten minutes of not knowing quite what to say before the others turned up – Louise and Will first, then Luke, then Eleanor and Marianne, Beth last of all.

Eleanor rushed immediately over when she came in. “Oh my God,” she exclaimed, hurrying to Ginny, who had returned to Tom’s side. “Is it over?” she asked in a low voice. “The danger, I mean. Are you alright?”

Ginny bobbed her head, her attention on Marianne, hungrily memorising every inch of her face like this was the last chance she had. “It’s over.”

“Are you okay?”

She offered a feeble half-grin. "I was the last time that I checked."

Tom stood stock-still staring at Marianne, in Eleanor's arms. His expression was unfathomable as he was frozen in place. Then, unexpectedly, as though she recognised him despite her young age, Marianne stretched a chubby hand, flailing, towards him. After his speech on how he refused to be disallowed from seeing her, Ginny expected Tom to immediately take Marianne in his arms and hold her, or something like that.

He didn't.

He still stared, unmoving. His eyes flickered to her outstretched fingers. Ginny abruptly understood his dilemma.

Who knew how much longer he had?

Years? Months? Weeks? Days?

Seconds?

Would this be the catalyst to ruin everything? Would it not be safe to resist the lure of affection towards his daughter, and therefore live longer with her? Or would it not be better for Marianne to know, later, when she was old enough to understand, that he had died trying to love her, instead of simply fading away into a dark, never-ending cowardice?

Would this be the end?

Tom lifted a hand to hers, his fingers reaching the short distance between them. Their fingers were less than a millimetre apart. Marianne strained, her cheeks cracking in those adorable smiles that only babies can create. Ginny realised that she was holding her breath.

And then he turned away. He avoided Ginny's eyes as he moved to hug her carefully and say goodbye, before he left – and he left in a hurry.

“Well.” Folding his arms across his chest, Will Gallantree raised one eyebrow. “That was bizarre.”

“Yeah, what was that about?” Grace asked, as Ginny stumbled to the sofa and then took Marianne gently from Eleanor.

“I don’t know,” Ginny lied, cuddling Marianne against her. “He’s just feeling weird, I guess.”

Alden didn’t speak; he just looked at them. After all, a picture tells a thousand words.

The tension was rising in the room, but was thankfully broken by Jacob yelling, “ANOTHER ONE!”, and, shortly after, Beth appeared through the living room.

“Merlin.” She whistled appreciatively and cast a glance at Grace. “Nice house.” She stood by the doorway, leaning her skinny weight on one foot and smiled at Ginny. “Sorry I’m late. I Apparated here just as this postman turned up, and he was all like, ‘did you seriously just appear out of thin air’ – I told him to get lost, but he didn’t, so I Obliviated him. How are you feeling?”

Ginny shifted. Her movement made Marianne squirm. “I’m okay. I’m just not supposed to move much, according to Healer Hartwin.” She grinned at her best friend. “All credit to her.”

“I feel as though I have to point out that credit should really also go to Healer Glasscoe,” Luke said smoothly, a teasing smile stretched lazily over his face, “as Healer Hartwin had to write me a letter asking for help...”

Grace flushed red. “Well, you are senior and everything!” she said huffily.

“Sneaky, sneaky,” Ginny joked, but her attention was on Beth, who had just noticed Luke, in the corner of the room. Her face had turned a most startling shade of purple, and was proceeding to glower at him – he who was quite adamantly ignoring her. Or perhaps not, she

mused, as it was only when Beth had looked away that he glanced in her direction.

“When are you coming back to work?” Louise asked, her voice so quiet and – generally silent – surprising that Ginny blinked to make sure she had heard correctly, before considering the question.

“Er.” Ginny hesitated. She wasn’t sure how to answer. “I’m... not sure...” The honest truth was that, all things thought out realistically, after all this hard work climbing higher in the Daily Prophet, she would probably never go back. From this moment on she would be looking after Tom... and when he wasn’t around to be looked after... well, then she would still have to take care of Marianne, and frankly, just the thought of a single day of a life without him made her feel sick enough to know that she wouldn’t be able to stomach going back the Prophet... after him. She chewed her lip. “I mean...” she flailed for words, her hands struggling in the air. “Marianne is still so young, and everything...”

“Oh, of course.” Louise nodded. “When she’s older.”

“Yeah...”

Or not.

Louise then pulled out a large envelope. “Well, we made you a card,” she said softly.

“Sort of,” said Grace. “We didn’t make it. We bought it. But we wrote in it. And it’s the thought that counts, I think.”

“Thanks,” said Ginny brightly, leaning forwards around Marianne to take it out of Louise’s hands. She ripped open the cream paper and opened the card. What seemed like hundreds of GET WELL SOONS jumped out at her, and she beamed at the knowledge that they had all been thinking of her. “Aww, that’s so sweet, thank you.”

“There were flowers, too,” Alden said, frowning. “Where are they?”

“I don’t know,” said Will. “I thought Beth had them.”

All eyes swivelled towards Beth. She shrugged. "I guess I left them in the hall by the door or something. I wasn't paying attention."

Alden huffed his breath out, clearly building slowly towards irritation with all that had been happening. "Don't all rush to volunteer to get them, then," he muttered, rolling his eyes, and headed out of the room.

Will shook his head teasingly, tutting. "Oh dear, Beth."

Of course, she didn't take it as a joke, though, and immediately flamed up, angry. "I didn't know I was supposed to bring them all the way up here! I just put them down when I took off my shoes, alright? For Merlin's sake!"

Ginny wanted to say 'calm down' but knew from experience that this only made it worse. She noticed Luke staring at Beth again, that strange look on his face – like frustration, resentment, fascination. And then he must have felt her watching him, because he looked over, frowning, and mouthed, "What?"

The redhead smiled knowingly and let her eyes flicker pointedly towards Beth. Instantly, Luke's freckled face flushed an awkward, unattractive pink, and he approached her, weaving swiftly through the various interlocking conversations starting up between the others. "What?" he repeated when he reached her, as though he wasn't blushing.

"You like Beth, don't you?" Ginny said bluntly.

"No," he immediately replied, stubborn. He stuck his hands in his pockets, and then pulled them out and fiddled with a piece of his hair, then folded them across his chest, "Of course not. No. Why would I? That's ridiculous. No."

"You're rambling," she pointed out, "and I've seen the way you look at her."

The colour of his face deepened to a rich plum.

"I'm not going to tell her," Ginny quickly reassured him, vaguely worried that his head was going to explode. She held Marianne protectively, ready to snatch her daughter away from a shower of Luke's organs if he did spontaneously combust. Marianne squirmed and kicked, closing her hands into little fists.

"I think she knows anyway," he mumbled, tracing an outline of a triangle on the floorboards with the tip of his scuffed shoe. He glanced quickly over his shoulder at the objection of interest in question and then back to his shoe.

"Well, that doesn't matter," she said conversationally. "The question is not of how you fell – it's how she feels, or, more accurately, how she reacts to how you feel."

Luke frowned, seeming to not understand for a moment. "...So I should ask if she likes me," he attempted to summarise.

"Ask?" she chuckled, a wicked grin splitting her face. "Oh, no, no. I have a much better idea." She crooked a finger at him to make him come closer, and then, holding Marianne tight so that she wouldn't fall off her lap, leaned close to his ear to whisper her plan to him.

His face lit up; his mouth fell slightly open in what she guessed with satisfaction was a combination of anxiety and acknowledgement of her genius. "Would you?"

"Me?" she choked. "No! Merlin, I'm married."

"Oh. Um." He frowned again. "Would Grace do it?" he asked hesitantly, and Ginny knew that he would prefer not to act the plan out on an ex-girlfriend in case it was taken the wrong way.

"Probably." It was just a risk that they would have to take, if this was to work.

Luke straightened up, nodded, and took a deep breath to steady himself. "Okay. Here I go." He smiled nervously, and then headed

across the room. “Grace,” he called, quite loudly, so as to attract the attention of everyone in the room – including, hopefully, Beth.

Grace turned, confused as to what he could possibly want, and then Luke abruptly took hold of her face and kissed her. Her eyebrows flew up into her hairline; she put her hands on his shoulders to push him away, but his lips changed to whispering something quickly, which Ginny knew would look to everyone else like an ‘I love you’, but which she personally knew was something along the lines of ‘go along with it, I’ll explain in a moment’. Then he crushed her lips under his again, and her hands slipped up to twist around his neck.

Ginny was rather surprised. She had known that both of her friends were good at acting, but she hadn’t expected something quite so... believable. She glanced at Beth, near the door, and saw that the older woman’s face was twisted in an unfathomable expression. Ginny could be quite certain, however, that she wasn’t leaping for joy.

And then Ginny saw Alden.

She had no idea how long he had been in the doorway, but he had stopped there, frozen, clutching Beth’s forgotten flowers, staring, stunned, silent.

Ginny’s heart sank. Oh, Merlin. She hadn’t accounted for Alden in her grand scheme.

After what seemed like a lifetime, Luke pulled away from Grace and looked back over his shoulder at where Beth stood – and as his eyes needed to glide over Alden to reach there, it could easily have been translated as something akin to triumph and smug glee. Grace followed his gaze. She gasped slightly, seeing Beth. “Oh...” She smiled broadly, seeing what she was helping to set up... and finally noticed Alden. She stiffened, eyes wide.

There was a crackling tension in the room – Alden frozen, Grace frozen, Luke looking pleased with himself, Beth startled, and everyone else waiting for the reactions. Marianne, unaware, chirped and gurgled happily.

Alden looked away as soon as his eyes met Grace's. He still didn't move for a moment, his gaze shifting uncertainly. He then forced himself two steps forwards, and from there, neatly sidestepped Luke and Grace's embrace, and walked to Ginny. He set the bouquet of flowers on the coffee table in front of her. "I found them," he said, and though his voice was quiet, it was surprisingly composed. "Get well soon, Ginny." He bent down, past Marianne, and gave her a quick, tense hug. She felt awful for putting him through this. What was it with her and causing pain to the Philips family. "I'm afraid I have somewhere to be. I'll see you soon."

He walked away, and from then on, the torrent of desperate letters that Grace Hartwin received... stopped.

xxx

Please review! The next chapter should be up fairly soon.

Chapter Forty-One: Light Your Eyes

For a moment, there was a nothing, and then, suddenly, startlingly, he found her – he shifted his weight to lean over her, crushing her lips beneath his, parting them, and, his voice raw with too many things to determine, in one rushed breath that belonged to both of them, said, “I want everything on your list.”

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xxx

November went, and December came. As always, the hands of the clock moved faster when there was something below the horizon that Ginny didn’t want to see, and as with every day she realised again and again how quickly time was running out for them, and yet the clock hands continued spinning. A paranoia crept over her, and whenever he left her sight, she would worry that this would be the last time she would see him. Though he never mentioned anything, it was clear that Tom knew the reason behind her tearful hugs and fierce kisses every time he left the apartment. Last weekend, he had gone

to quickly visit Eleanor by himself. She had hyperventilated for an hour.

Deep down, behind all the aching sadness and desperation, there was a shame that struck her. She had fought in a War, and she had taken all the deaths like a man. She hadn't cried a single tear for all of that, and through her education she had likewise been guarded. And now... almost every moment of every day was crying and sobbing for what she was to lose. It didn't seem fair for her to lose everything, to start all over, and then lose it again.

Just the thought made her eyes sting, and she brushed at her face viciously with her sleeve, hating herself. Her vision cleared, she attempted again to read who the letter was from. Louise Armstrong was written neatly on the back. Curious, she slipped it open. She couldn't remember ever receiving a letter from Louise before.

Ginny Riddle,

I know that it may be slightly unusual for me to write to you, but I felt I needed to speak to someone and, for reasons that will become obvious, I didn't want to speak to Beth. Well. I don't quite know how to say it, because the whole idea seems very ludicrous to me still. I have found in Will's bedside table cabinet a very small black velvet box. A jewellery box. A very small jewellery box. Say, a ring-sized jewellery box, perhaps. I don't know; I haven't checked. I don't dare check. However, he's seemed very... bouncy, recently, for example, as though happy, but somehow nervous at the same time. It's all very strange. He is taking us out to dinner on the tenth, to a very expensive restaurant. I don't even know what to think. It's so... if he... if he proposes, per say, then I really do not have the slightest clue what to say. Well, yes, obviously. Maybe. I don't know! See, this is why I have asked you and not Beth... please write back quickly.

-Louise x

Ginny's eyes widened, amazed. There were two main causes to her amazement – the primary being the fact that Will was, perhaps, going to propose to Louise so quickly (though of course everyone knew that they were adorable together and had practically been born with each

other in mind), and the secondary (a very close second) being how much she had written. If Louise had ever spoken so much out loud, Ginny may well have fainted. It was really strange.

Will and Louise. Mrs. Armstrong. Mrs. Gallantree. Louise Gallantree. It did have a nice ring to it, if anything. Ginny could see how mind-boggling it would be... at least she had been given four or five months – if four or five very depressing and suicidal months – of preparing for the idea of marrying Tom before he officially asked her.

She set the letter from Louise to the bottom of the pile of envelopes in her hands so that she could reply later and looked at the next one. It was boring and official-looking, with a seal on it from the Ministry. Probably another of these stupid ‘today is national Let’s Avoid Wand Crime week – keep your eyes open’ letters that they got all the time. She tossed it onto the table and looked at the next letter. On the back of this pink one, in big, loopy letters, was doodled the name Eleanor Maeve Fionn.

Eleanor Maeve Fionn was doodled in big, loopy letters on the front of the cream envelope. Hm. Interesting.

“There’s a letter from Eleanor,” Ginny called over to Tom in the kitchen. She tore it open, and proceeded to read it aloud to him, taking a few steps across the living room, past the coffee table, towards him so that he could hear its contents better.

Dear Ginny,

OH MY GOD, you won’t believe it. Well, you may. In fact, I’m sure you understand perfectly. I’m getting ahead of myself. Breathe, Ellie. Okay, I’ll just say it – I got knocked up! It’s so insane. I’m still reeling with shock that I’m going to have a baby. It’s incredible. I hope it’s a little girl I can pamper to bits. Or maybe a boy I can play with. I don’t know.

Besides that, how are you? How is Marianne? I am so grateful to you by the way - for giving me some practice at playing mother with her. Oh, and tell Tom that he left his pen behind on my dining room table.

He's such a silly boy these days. What does he want with a will, anyway? You need to get him some serious medication. Kidding.

Love, Ellie xxx

"He's such a silly boy these days. What does he want with a..."

And there she stopped reading.

"You wrote a will."

Tom didn't answer. She heard that his movements in the kitchens had stopped, and he had become very quiet.

"You wrote," she repeated, as though if she heard it again, it would be more real, "a will."

He appeared in the doorway, staring at his feet. "Yes."

"Why?" She tried to keep her tone of voice calm and composed, but it shook and gave out. She was trembling. She couldn't determine for herself whether the fury or the anguish was stronger.

"Why?" he echoed incredulously. "Why?" He approached her, shaking his head as though he could scarcely believe what he was hearing. "I apologise for wanting to make sure that you and Marianne will have everything you could possibly want or need after I've-"

No-

She didn't want to hear the word-

"What?" he said, almost angrily.

She blinked. She hadn't realised that she had verbalised her mental outcry. Neither had she realised that the tears had resurfaced until her blinking made her eyes blur. "You didn't have to-" she choked out.

"I am going to die, Ginevra!" he shouted. He shoved a hand through his hair, the expression on his face something like anger, something

like frustration, something like pain. “Do you understand that? I am going to die, and there is nothing that either of us can do about it. I wanted to be certain that before ... before whatever is going to happen to me... happens – that you and Marianne could be happy-”

“Don’t you dare assume I can be happy without you,” she said, her voice low and lethal with ice. “And now you’ve ruined everything-”

“Why is that a surprise?” Tom bellowed. “That is what I do! I ruin lives! That’s all I’m good at! I ruined the Decrow family’s life, I ruined the Vander family’s life – Rosalind Vander – Bernard Terby – and you. I’ve been with you, what, four years? – and it has always been swinging wildly between problem after problem – because I kill someone, or because someone I tried to kill wants their revenge on you, or because I’m too ruddy stupid to recognise that being in love with you is going to kill you – and now I am simply getting what I deserve. My problem has murdered so many people – it’s only fair it should murder me-”

“Don’t!” she shrieked, hitting his arm as hard as she could to make him shut up. He didn’t even seem to notice; he turned his back on her. “That’s not true. We were perfect – and we are perfect, no matter what ridiculous things happen – and we could be perfect, if you weren’t so idiotic as to go and write a-”

“YOU DON’T GET IT!” he yelled, swinging wildly back around to face her. “This isn’t a game! It is not as though if I hadn’t written it then I would live forever – because it simply doesn’t work like that!”

“It could!” she snapped, stubborn and stupid as ever.

“What are you expecting, a miracle?” The cold derision in his voice made his own opinion on miracles clear.

“Maybe.”

Tom stalked towards her, his face icy. “I hate to burst your bubble, Ginevra, but there are no such things as miracles. There are no such things as happy endings. And there’s no God who’s going to swoop in and save me just because you ask him nicely.”

“Why would I ever ask nicely?” she retorted hotly. Angry tears swelled in her eyes. “I’m going down kicking and screaming. I’m not specifically religious, either, but how can you possibly imagine that everything we’ve been through – all the breaks, all the falls, and all the reunions – isn’t because of something?”

“Generally, the religions that I know tend to exclude murder as holy activity, so as far as I’m concerned, no ‘God’ would ever exist for me! What reason have I to believe anyway – nothing good has happened in my life, so-”

“Excuse me?” she said disbelievingly. “Nothing good has happened in your life?”

His jaw tightened, his expression more irritated than sympathetic, as though he was kicking himself for not having realised how she would take this, that she was the one being stupid, not him, and that she was just one big annoyance, a thorn in his toe, a rock in his shoe. “I didn’t mean-”

“Nothing good has happened in your life?” she repeated, her voice cracking as she shouted. “What am I, if nothing good has happened? What are we? What is this apartment? What is our life – WHAT IS SHE, IF NOTHING GOOD HAS HAPPENED IN OUR LIFE!” she suddenly screamed, pointing fiercely at Marianne, who was propped against a cushion and watching the argument somewhat tearfully, as though not sure what to make of it.

“I wasn’t referring to that!” he shouted.

And, idiotically, for a split-second, she forgot: “Then what were you referring to?!”

“WHAT DID YOU THINK I WAS REFERRING TO?”

Of course. She cringed, biting her lip hard enough for it to hurt. She tasted blood. “I want to see it,” she suddenly exclaimed, tears burning in her eyes. “I want to see it.”

“What?” Tom stared at her, taken aback by the change in tone.

“I want to see it,” she repeated. “I want to see it!”

“No.”

“It’s just a piece of paper, right?! Why not?!”

“You can’t. Ginevra, you-”

“I WANT TO SEE IT!” she screamed, hitting out at him – and the rush of satisfaction of taking out all of her anger, and pain, and sadness, and distraught loneliness, made her feel better and worse all at once – and she hit him again, and again, and again – he didn’t even flinch. He tried to raise his voice over her.

“You can’t – it’s not because I don’t want to show you, Ginevra – calm down – it’s illegal – only the witness, meaning Eleanor – just – please – Ginevra-”

She screamed at him, punching harder, the taut paleness of her freckled knuckles splitting as they bounced off harder, less sympathetic bones like his elbows and shoulders, bright blood streaming down her wrists as well as trickling down her chin from her broken lip as tears flung themselves down her faces with startling velocity.

“Stop it – hey, stop that-” He grabbed the tops of her arms, trying to hold her still and stop her from destroying him, or herself, or the whole apartment in the process. “Ginevra.”

Ginny tried to rip herself away, twisting violently from side to side, squirming and sobbing. “Let go of me,” she cried.

“No.”

Tom held her fast, his weak hands alarmingly good at stopping her from moving, and somehow all of the fight drained out of her, and she stood limp before him, blood dripping onto the floor from her loose hands. She gave up. She had a sudden head-rush from all the flailing

and whirling, and it was only her husband's hands on her upper arms that even kept her standing. She could barely feel anything – not even the physical pain of her hands and face, let alone the usually mind-numbing agony of waiting for life to get better and knowing that it wouldn't.

"Look," said Tom quietly, barely audible over the heave of her breathing. "...I don't particularly want to die either, alright?"

"Then don't," she said brokenly.

He laughed; a low, flat, rueful chuckle without humour. However, when she lifted her shattered eyes he must have seen that she didn't laugh, even if he didn't mean it. He pressed his lips together in regret. Then, still holding her, he pulled her carefully into his chest and wrapping his arms tightly around her. "If only I had the option," he murmured.

"Stay with me," she whispered. And, for then, at least, he did.

xxx

REVIEWWWW. You know you want to. (:

Chapter Forty-Two: When The World Is Out To Get You

“You wrote,” she repeated, as though if she heard it again, it would be more real, “a will.”

He laughed; a low, flat, rueful chuckle without humour. However, when she lifted her shattered eyes he must have seen that she didn't laughter, even if he didn't mean it. He pressed his lips together in regret. Then, still holding her, he pulled her carefully into his chest and wrapping his arms tightly around her.

“Stay with me,” she whispered. And, for then, at least, he did.

xxx

Even breakfast tasted of death now. The battered fork, bent from having clattered to floor too many times to count; the slightly overdone edges from when his dizziness lost him his concentration while cooking; the sugar that she insisted on piling high enough to burn her taste buds. Even the pancakes themselves – with their innocent connotations of her nineteenth birthday, and the evening, and the morning after – seemed to Ginny sour and morbid.

She couldn't finish, and carried the plate swiftly through to the kitchen to dump the remains before Tom noticed the ungrateful act. However, when she lightly flipped the bin lid up, she found her husband's own pancakes staring morosely up at her. She supposed that he had felt the same way she did.

“Ginevra, have you seen my pinstriped shirt?”

His voice, coming through from the bedroom, broke through her thoughts, and, realising that she was staring blankly into the depths of the kitchen bin, she let the lid fall with a hollow bang.

“You have a pinstriped shirt?” she called back, frowning.

An exasperated sigh came as a form of response. “Yes.” Tom emerged from the bedroom, the dust clinging to his untidy hair and tired, unshaven face indicating that he had already been under the

bed. "I wore it on that poker night, when we went out with Alden, Grace, and some others."

'Some others' meaning Philippa Decrow. He was still ashamed to say her name sometimes. She remembered that night. And she remembered that shirt.

"Oh." She cringed. "You mean the really ugly one?" No wonder she hadn't remembered it. She had tried her hardest not to.

The expression on his face made it clear that he didn't really appreciate the mockery much. He wasn't in a very good mood today, so it seemed.

"It's in the box at the back of the wardrobe."

He almost turned back to the bedroom, but stopped. He eyed her suspiciously. "I thought that was the throwing-out box."

She smiled broadly. "It is."

His eyes flicked skywards in an annoyed 'heaven help me' gesture. Then he returned his gaze to her face and told her, somewhat more haughtily than he had probably intended, "I like that shirt."

She grimaced. "Well, I suppose someone has to."

Apparently not dignifying that with a response, Tom turned his back on her and went to retrieve the beloved abomination. Grinning at his exasperation, the redhead skipped through after him. She found him already digging through the box, shifting piles of tatty, ugly, or otherwise unwanted possessions. As he shook his hideous shirt free, something glittering caught her eye.

"What's that?" she asked curiously, ducking to her knees beside the box.

"What's what?" Tom said absent-mindedly, pulling the world's most unattractive shirt over his head.

Her hand darted out, quick as a little bird, a magpie questing for its shiny prize, and from the tangles of fabric she snatched the Time-Turner. Despite having been thrown in there months ago, when she and Tom had made that disaster journey to see the Weasleys and had afterwards agreed not to mess with time again, it had not a speck of dust on it, unlike all of the other filthy items in the box. It had the appearance of having been polished to perfection only seconds before; the sparkling hourglass spun freely as though brilliantly oiled, and even in the early-morning darkness of the bedroom it glinted like gold.

Tom freed his face from his shirt and looked up as his fingers fastened sleeve buttons. His eyes found the medallion swinging ominously from her wrist; then flashed disbelievingly to her face. “No.”

She didn’t answer. She simply stared, blank as a canvas, her thoughts reeling.

“No,” he repeated, more firmly. “Don’t even think about it.”

“I could save you,” she whispered, more to herself than anything.

“Could you?” he said harshly. His eyes were hard. He sat back on his heels, folded his arms across his chest. “How?”

Her mouth fell slightly open, considering. “I could go back... I could... I could stop you - I could help you – and you wouldn’t – and then Vander... and Bernard wouldn’t hurt us... and-”

“Bernard Terby?” Tom echoed incredulously. “Bernard Terby has nothing to do with me dying. If we had never crossed paths – if our worlds remained entirely separate, or if he was somehow already dead – then this would still happen. This is my own fault. How would getting rid of the Terby factor have any effect on you being impregnated with the spawn of Satan?”

“What?” Ginny wasn’t sure she understood.

“It’s Marianne. She and she alone is what is doing this to me.” He smiled ruefully, glancing at the cot in the corner where their half-

awake daughter was blearing kicking her legs. “The only way you could ever save me is by getting rid of her – and we both know very well that nothing will ever happen to her if we can help it.”

Ginny stared at him with her eyes broken. He couldn’t dismiss anything and everything that could save him, because, quite simply, if he did... then he would die. And that wasn’t tolerable.

“When it comes down to it, Ginevra,” he said quietly, “it’s me or her.”

She shook her head repeatedly, her head rushing. She looked up just in time to see her Tom’s face crumple slightly and then turn quickly away as though her silence was not the answer he had been secretly wishing for. As though he had maybe tried to deliberately delude himself that she might exclaim that she would choose him in an instant. And she knew she couldn’t. She clamped her teeth down on her bottom lip tight, suddenly fearful that she would start crying again. She pretended that she hadn’t seen his expression.

“Just...” he heaved a sigh. “Put it back in the box.”

Of course, she didn’t mean to hold onto it with a vice-like grip, but as she willed her fingers to let go, she could pry herself away.

“Ginevra,” he said.

Screwing up her face with the effort, Ginny forced herself to drop it back into the mess of ugly clothing.

Tom leaned over and touched his lips wordlessly to her forehead; resting there for a moment, pressed close enough to her that the rough scratch of his jaw hurt her face, before standing up and returning the throwing-out box to the wardrobe. He pushed it right to the back, and was motionless, considering it. Then he said, still facing away from her, “As it happens to quite conveniently be the throwing-out box, I’ll make sure to take care of throwing it out later.”

She didn’t answer.

He looked over his shoulder at her but didn't meet her eyes. "I think it would be best, Ginevra - for your own health, and Marianne's, and maybe mine, too - ... if you just let me go."

Never.

Without anything else left to say, Tom disappeared into the bathroom.

Ginny waited until there was the noise of running water to cover her movements before she dived forwards and retrieved the heavy cardboard box from the back of the wardrobe. She dipped her hand in and fished out the Time-Turner; shoved the box to the back, and shut the door on it; scampered across the room and stuffed it a green handbag hanging off the back of the desk-chair.

She would rather have something and not need it than need something and not have it. There was no loop-hole for her to duck through at this particular moment in time, but if ever there came a day when things could only change for the better, then she would be ready.

xxx

Tom had not moved from where he was standing by the window for a very long time. He was perfectly silent, holding a letter in two hands which he read and reread and reread. Ginny wanted to know what it said, but it had been addressed strictly to Tom Riddle and so she didn't want to ask unless he wanted to tell her. For all she knew, it could be from Eleanor about his ... will, his stupid paper document, his death wish – and as much as she wanted to read it, she knew that she wasn't allowed to, and was keeping her distance.

Abruptly, he spun around – then wheeled back, and smashed his foot into the wall as hard as he could. In his weak, deteriorating state, it wasn't much of a feat, but it still left a dent and crumbled the painted plaster.

Ginny stared at him in alarm. "What the hell?" was all that she could manage.

"They fired me," he ground out. "They went and ruddy fired me, for Christ's sake!" His voice had become a shout.

Oh dear.

"Well." She tried to think of something to say. "You didn't really attend work for a while, did you? I mean, when we had that whole... break up thing... and then when we had arguments during my pregnancy, you didn't go much... and then, you've been sick for a while, so... you know, it's not really-"

"Whose side are you on?" he demanded furiously, staring down at her, eyes flashing.

"I'm not on anyone's side," she retorted. "I am simply saying that it's not exactly unreasonable – and you didn't like it there anyway – you could easily get-"

"That's not the point!" he bellowed, hurling the letter, and the clump of the other envelopes that he held, angrily at the sofa. Marianne, at four months, was able to sit up now, but the combination of the sudden shouting and the soft thump of the letters hitting the sofa fabric near where she was sitting was enough to startle her into slumping sideways. Wide-eyed, she tipped off the sofa and fell into a heap on the floor.

And then she began bawling.

A low, gravelly, angry noise growled from deep within Tom's chest as he stared at his daughter crying on the floorboards.

Ginny sighed, pushing her scarlet hair back messily from her face. "I'll do it," she said tiredly, moving across the room from the dining room, where she had been searching for a book that she owed Grace.

Then came the unexpected: Tom snarled, "You always do it!" with a bewilderingly ferocity, and stormed forwards to get Marianne-

NO-

But he couldn't do it-

He couldn't touch her-

He might die-

She only had time to drag in a horrified gasp of air before Tom reached Marianne and snatched her up in his arms.

Nothing happened at all.

He held Marianne tightly to his chest, pressing his face into her soft, dark downy hair, breathing deeply, as though he could inhale her very being and keep her with him forever. Ginny watched the exchange. This couldn't be happening. It was too good to be true. It turned out that she was right, because not two minutes had passed before she noticed that he was swaying, stumbling, shaking.

"Tom?" she called, taking a few steps forward. "Tom, are you okay?"

He didn't answer her. She didn't know if he was ignoring her, or if something was seriously wrong.

"Tom?" she asked again. "Tom?" She ran forwards, sensing that this wasn't going to go down well, and as she approached, she saw his knees starting to give out. "Tom!" No reply. She sprinted. She just had time to snatch Marianne out of his arms before he hit the floor.

In a moment of fear and blinding panic and not knowing what to do, Ginny stood frozen, clutching Marianne, who was now crying harder than ever. Ginny had a desperate urge within her to just sit down and cry with her daughter, but she didn't. She hurried through to the bedroom, kissing the top of her head, murmuring meaningless comfort, and set Marianne down in her cot before rushing back to Tom as quickly as she could.

"Oh my God," she whispered, dropping to her knees beside him. Was he already – had he already – no, he couldn't have – Her hands flew uncertainly from his hidden face to his awkwardly-bent limbs to his limp torso. She finally grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him

to face up the right way, pulling him into her lap where she could protect him from the world.

He was awake, thank God for that. His eyelids flickered weakly, trying to make sense of what had just happened. The pale expanse of his brow puckered in confusion; he blinked repetitively as though a bright light had just been turned on in front of him. Then, like the flick of a switch, he sat bolt upright, twisting sideways to lean his weight on his left hand, as the coughs ripped through him.

Ginny looked on with tear-blurred eyes, waiting to see the slow, thick drip of blood through his stretched fingers, and yet she kept on waiting. There was no blood.

“You’re getting better,” she breathed, astounded, barely daring to blink in case when she opened her eyes she realised that she had been hallucinating and that everything was different.

Tom didn’t turn to face her. “Things get better before they get worse.”

Her face screwed up in an angry, frustrated sorrow. “Why? Why, for God’s sake, do you always have to be so pessimistic? Can’t you just at least humour me – pretend, for my sake, that you’re going to be okay?”

He was silent for a moment. There was the sound of him swallowing, hard. “I... I don’t want to lie to you.”

“Please.”

There was another silence, and the now-soft whimpering of Marianne in her cot could be heard through it. Then, the floor creaking quietly beneath him, Tom turned where he was sitting and captured her eyes. The quirk of a small smile left her heart stinging as she was forcibly reminded how good a liar he was:

“I’m getting better.”

xxx

When the world is out to get someone you love, there is very little you can do except to hold onto them, never let go, and hope that your presence is enough to keep the rest of existence at bay – but there is always, always something in the way.

In the dark, she could no longer see his eyes, but had been staring long enough to know exactly where they were, in the curve and bend of his silhouette, his shape only interrupted by the small, chubby form of Marianne lying between them. She knew from his breathing that he was still awake. She tried to picture the exact shape of those eyes, what expression they would be in.

To her alarm, she couldn't.

She couldn't remember his face, and he was less than a metre away. She struggled to come up with a vivid image of his features – maybe the expression in his dark eyes when he looked at her, maybe the twist of his lips when he smiled, maybe the strong rectangle of his jaw. It terrified her how hard she had to concentrate to remember. Was this what it would be like when he was... gone?

"Are you alright?" his voice came softly, faintly, from the dark silhouette, perhaps having heard the panicked hitch in her breath.

Ginny swallowed past a lump in her throat. "I'm fine," she lied after a moment's pause to compose herself. "...I'm just worried about Marianne." She forced a small laugh. "If I ever fall asleep, I'll end up probably rolling over and squashing her."

Tom didn't answer.

She considered the weak tone in which he had spoken, barely seconds ago, and wondered if having Marianne so close was such a good idea. "I can put her back in her cot, if you want," she offered.

The rustle of his wavy hair against the pillow left her to guess that he was shaking his head. "No," he replied. "I... I want her here."

Ginny bit her lip and bobbed her head in acceptance. "Okay." She reached out, brushing the back of her hand lightly over Marianne's

face – and there her fingers met Tom's. Her eyes flashed up to where his face was lurking in the darkness, but didn't speak.

"Do you..." he paused, awkward, tentative, hesitating. He sighed. "Do you think I'm any good at this?"

"At what?" she whispered, not understanding.

He cleared his throat nervously. "At... at being... her father."

Ginny's heart swelled with pity and sadness. "Of course you are," she said gently. She chuckled lightly. "Hey, at least you've never dropped her, unlike yours truly."

There was no answer. She suspected that her teasing comment had not made him feel any better.

Then, out of the blue: "I want to see Fionn's baby."

Ginny smiled. "Well, of course you can, when she actually has-" She stopped dead, realising what he really meant by what he had said. "Tom, you'll be fine; it's only-"

"Eight months at very least," he murmured.

Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them back furiously. "And you don't think you'll last that long."

Again, as he always did when he simply didn't want to answer something she had said with the honest truth, he pretended that he hadn't heard her, or pretended that it was a rhetorical statement. Not something that required an answer. Because, for all the million questions in the world, the majority are left hanging and uncertain.

She didn't get to sleep at all that night.

xxx

Hm. Wow, because this chapter wasn't at all a dead giveaway. I wonder what will happen now. PLEASE REVIEW, I love you all!!

And by the way, for some reason my own review button isn't working, so I'd like to say here: Someday, oh my God, I am so chuffed! I found this little fanfic saying 'inspired by Rewind' or something like that, and oh my God. I know exactly what you mean – this whole thing was inspired by the brilliance of Lady Moonglow's Have You Ever fic – but I never in a million years expected that I could ever have that effect. Thank you so much – and I think that your fic, or at least the first chapter that I've read so far is a really good idea, I love it! (: xxx

Also, another thing – OH MY GOD, KICHIGAI17! Made me a trailer! I now have TWO trailers for Rewind, I feel so famous! Thank you so much, it's amazing, I love you. And I love the song in the background, by the way, what is it? Only bad thing is that I've lost the links to both trailers so if Kichigai17 and storm-brain could both post me the links so I could put them on my profile page, then thank youuu, that would be loved and appreciated and you will each receive the world's biggest cyber-hug. (: xxx

Chapter Forty-Three: Playing Happy Families

Her hand darted out, quick as a little bird, a magpie questing for its shiny prize, and from the tangles of fabric she snatched the Time-Turner. Despite having been thrown in there months ago, when she and Tom had made that disaster journey to see the Weasleys and had afterwards agreed not to mess with time again, it had not a speck of dust on it, unlike all of the other filthy items in the box. It had the appearance of having been polished to perfection only seconds before; the sparkling hourglass spun freely as though brilliantly oiled, and even in the early-morning darkness of the bedroom it glinted like gold. "I could save you," she whispered, more to herself than anything.

Ginny waited until there was the noise of running water to cover her movements before she dived forwards and retrieved the heavy cardboard box from the back of the wardrobe. She dipped her hand in and fished out the Time-Turner; shoved the box to the back, and shut the door on it; scampered across the room and stuffed it a green handbag hanging off the back of the desk-chair. She would rather have something and not need it than need something and not have it. There was no loop-hole for her to duck through at this particular moment in time, but if ever there came a day when things could only change for the better, then she would be ready.

Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them back furiously. "And you don't think you'll last that long."

Again, as he always did when he simply didn't want to answer something she had said with the honest truth, he pretended that he hadn't heard her, or pretended that it was a rhetorical statement. Not something that required an answer. Because, for all the million questions in the world, the majority are left hanging and uncertain. She didn't get to sleep at all that night.

xxx

The mistletoe caught them, and she gave it everything she had.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered when they broke apart, a smile cracking her lips broadly. Her eyes glowed, and for the first time in a

long time, she really was happy. Ever since Tom's coughing fit, two weeks ago, when he had collapsed holding Marianne, he had been recovering. He hadn't coughed blood since, and his only complaint was having a stinging headache twenty-four-seven. That didn't really matter to her. What was a headache, compared to the threat of losing him. Now she was just starting to contemplate something that she wished she had thought of earlier:

What if, when Tom's second soul died, it didn't take him with it?

What if it simply... disappeared? Leaving Tom... normal?

All of their problems would be solved.

She hadn't asked him about his alter-ego – she never did, because the few times she had tried, early on in their relationship, he had stiffened, gone blank, and said that it didn't matter – but she was positive that everything was finally improving.

It was their first Christmas at home together, and she was looking forward to the whole idea of it. Christmas dinner, probably badly-cooked; presents; a spindly tree that looked as likely to fall over as Ginny always was. Marianne was lying on a colourful mat on the floor playing with a plastic bauble, her little forehead screwed up in concentration as she turned it around and around in her hands.

"So where is it?" she whispered, close enough that her breath fanned warmly over his face.

He smirked. "Where is what?"

She ducked her head and head-butted him gently in the chest. "My present, stupid," she grinned, adjusting her Christmas hat where it had fallen lop-sided.

"Aha, but where is mine, first?"

"Oh, but what if I haven't got you one?" she teased, her lips quirking despite her attempt at a serious face. "What would you do then?"

Tom tipped his head to one side, as though considering this. “Well, then,” he said slowly, “I would have to eat you.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Eat away.”

Unexpectedly, he ducked his head and attempted to playfully bite the tip of her nose. She gave a small shriek, jumping back out of the way. She narrowed her eyes balefully at him, though a smile still tugged at her mouth. “Fine,” she said finally, poking her tongue out at him. “Be that way.”

With a spin and a skip, she hurried across the room to the Christmas tree – and as it was precarious enough already, she was especially careful not to flail or skid, should she knock it over and break some of the more fragile baubles decorating it – and retrieved from the bottom a fairly flat but soft wrapped package.

“Here you go!” she chirped, bouncing across to him and thrusting it at him.

Glancing curiously at her once as though he could by simply looking at her guess what the wrapping paper held, Tom neatly began to shell the gift out of its packaging. After a moment or two, something soft and dark green fell out. His hand flashed out to catch whatever it was before it crumpled untidily to the floor, and it unfolded in his hands, revealing itself to be soft pyjamas.

“I just thought that you’ve had the same PJ’s since you were, what, seventeen – and I reckoned it was time for a change,” she grinned at him.

Tom blinked at her, looking alarmed. “When did you see them at school?”

“You were sick one day, remember,” she pointed out. “After the whole silly beaver thing at Christmas.”

“Oh.”

“I would say to put them on, except it’s only about eleven o’clock,” she joked, looking at the bright stripes of wintry sunshine falling across the living through the gaps in the cold clouds. She pushed her head suddenly against the material. “But look! We match now. Red and green, see, Christmas colours!”

Then there was the rustle, and the abrupt chill on Ginny’s ears, that alerted her that her nice furry Christmas hat had disappeared. “Hey!” she exclaimed, surprised, lifting her head to look up at her husband. She saw that it was perched on top of his head, looking fairly ridiculous, but, due to his height, infuriatingly out of reach for retrieving.

“Christmas colours,” he said thoughtfully. “Yes, I think it does match quite nicely.”

“That’s mine!” she said, incensed.

“Is it?” he teased.

“Yes – give it back!” She jumped for it, but he leaned back so that her arm flailed uselessly in front of his face, dangerously close to hitting him in the eye, but nowhere near the success of grabbing her beloved hat. “This is bullying.”

“Well, I think it suits me better, anyway,” he said calmly, a devilish smirk twisting his lips.

“No, it doesn’t,” she pouted. She grabbed the front of his jumper to hold him still while she stretched uselessly, him moving e out of her time every time. Failing once more, she changed her tactics. She eyed him challengingly. “Very well, then, husband. I shall make a suggestion. I propose we arm-wrestle for it.”

“As you wish.”

He set the pyjamas down on the sofa seat. Marianne looked up at the commotion, but quickly deemed it uninteresting and returned to the world of her shiny gold bauble. Ginny glanced at Tom. He was still smirking, and she didn’t like it.

Here, she was certain that she had the upper hand – literally. Taller he may be, able to hold things tantalisingly just out of her reach, but she had been playing Quidditch for six years, fighting in a war for three of those years, and was therefore stronger physically. Honestly, she hadn't done any sports in a long time, but she was still sure that she would defeat him easily.

Together they crossed to the dining table; took a seat on either side; extended their hands. She grabbed his hand quite fiercely, and he just held on half-heartedly.

"Come on, you pansy," she said ferociously. "Make an effort."

"If you insist." He gripped her hand more forcefully, and looked expectantly across the table at her. "Are you ready?"

"One... two..." She narrowed her eyes at him. This would be easy. "Three."

Ginny shoved her hand across as hard as she could – and absolutely nothing happened. She pushed harder, and harder; she stood up and used both hands. Still no movement.

There was an expression of extreme amusement dancing in Tom's dark eyes, and this only made her more annoyed.

"For God's sake!" she burst out, feeling as though her brain was going to explode if she pushed at his hand any harder. "You can't be serious!"

"You're right," he admitted, nodding his head as though to acknowledge that he had done wrong. And then, with a bizarre combination of looking apologetic, triumphant, and thoroughly amused, he pushed her hand down easily down to the table. "Sorry, Ginevra."

Her mouth fell open, enraged. "That's not fair!" she said, leaping to her feet. "I – I want a re-match!"

“Alright.”

“No. No.” She looked at him with suspicion. She moved around to the other side of the table, where he was sitting. No. A re-match was exactly what he wanted... well, she saw right through that. Ha-ha! “I don’t want a re-match...”

He tipped lazily on the back legs of the chair and raised one eyebrow at her slightly strange behaviour. “...Alright.”

She thought carefully about her plan of action, and it was then that she came up with an ingenious idea. He would be powerless to her now... She gave a mental cackle of pure evil.

Not even using her hands, Ginny flicked her red hair over her left shoulder and walked slowly towards him. He watched her approach with interest from just beneath the rim of the Christmas hat. She dropped her head, tilting it slightly to the side, and peeked up at him through her lowered eyelashes. Then she put one hand on either of his shoulders, and leaned to let her parted lips brush lightly across his.

There was a shared moment of silence, eyes half-closed, barely breathing.

She could feel him trembling beneath her lips.

A mental countdown started in her head. Five... four... three...

He stopped breathing altogether.

Two...

Not even letting her count to one, he stretched up to press his mouth desperately against hers-

And she reached to snatch the hat from his head, straightening up.

She pulled away so abruptly that Tom looked stunned for a moment, blinking, and the chair – still tipped back on two legs – rocked precariously backwards. He had to grab the table surface beside him

to stop himself from falling. The front two legs banged loudly as the chair smacked back down to earth. He scowled at Ginny.

“Don’t tell me that you didn’t see that coming,” she scoffed, grinning as she pulled the hat back over her head.

He exhaled sharply, as though not sure whether to be annoyed or resigned to his fate. “I did actually see it coming,” he told her, “but I was significantly more interested in what you had to offer than the stupid hat.”

“Ah, well.” Now it was her turn to smirk. “Too bad for you.”

Tom stood, scratching the back of his head. “Note to self: rig more mistletoe next year,” he mumbled to himself.

She beamed at him; her smile so wide that she thought her face would split. It was the first time that she had heard him make any reference towards the fact that he might live longer; that he might make it to next Christmas at all. The very thought made her heart swell enough that she hopped after him and threw her arms around his neck just for the hell of it. “Mistletoe is overrated him,” she informed him conversationally when they broke apart.

“True.” He gave a small smirk. “I still like the opportunities that it gives.”

She shrugged. “Why? You get the opportunities anyway.” She narrowed her eyes at him, remembering. “And speaking of getting things – where – is – my – present? Grr.”

“How old are you, five?” he said amusedly. “Yours is last.”

She huffed. “Well, okay. Let’s give Marianne hers!” she chirped, her resentment forgotten as she was once more swirled up in the excitement of badly-wrapped gifts and artistic pictures on cards depicting robins and holly bushes.

Tom nodded, and went to get it from beneath the tree as Ginny went to get their daughter.

“Marianne,” she cooed, sitting on the floor next to her. “Marianne, do you want to see your present?” She picked her up and sat her on her lap, bouncing slightly.

On and on Marianne continued to turn the gold bauble around in her hands.

“Marianne...” she sang. “Come on, it’s Christmas... humour us.”

Tom crouched beside them and held out a fairly large, squashy package. “Look, Marianne,” he said, trying to make his voice sound as interesting as possible. He shook the present in front of her.

The young baby looked up, blinking hazel eyes, and observed the brightly-wrapped gift hovering before her. She stared for a moment, as though considering whether it was worth her time, and then held her short, chubby arms out. Tom held it out, still supporting it with one hand as she clumsily pulled at the paper... taking ten minutes to get off one piece of tape, and clearly getting nowhere.

“Hang on,” Tom said considerately, and helped her. A medium-sized golden teddy fell out which Marianne eyed before pulling it towards her. They had given her the large beaver plushie that had been Tom’s own Christmas present when he was seventeen, but had felt that she needed one that she have as her own. Plus, this one was more entertaining for a baby, as it was magically enchanted to make funny noises when someone grabbed its nose. Ginny demonstrated.

Marianne’s eyes grew wide with awe as she regarded this display of teddy-handling, and proceeded to try and make it work herself, but not really understanding how. She was soon completely focused in that, and drowned the rest of the world out, shaking the teddy feebly to try and make it squeak or beep or hoot.

Tom looked up from watching his daughter and over at Ginny. The corners of his lips tilted up. “Are you ready for yours?”

Her face lit up. She would have bounced and clapped her hands together, except she was still holding Marianne. “Ooh, gimme!”

“Well, I can’t,” he said shortly, and seemed to get a lot of entertainment out of watching her face fall. “It requires going somewhere.”

Her pent-up breath came out in a ‘wow’ noise. “Can we go now?”

He didn’t answer; just stood and extended a hand to her. He pulled her to her feet, his other hand out to steady Marianne, still in her arms. Marianne dropped the teddy and her tiny pink face screwed up as though she was seriously thinking about crying.

Ginny’s mouth twisted sideways in thought. “It’s not really possible to take the teddy, is it?”

“It is, if we get the pushchair... but it’s not that far, so it would be slightly excessive.” Tom took his wand from his pocket and spun it casually between his fingers. “We could always leave her here and cast Loiscis. We wouldn’t be gone long, anyway.”

She bit her lip. “I suppose.” There was no danger of psychopaths coming to kill them now or anything, so it should be alright. Marianne couldn’t stand up, so there was no risk of her falling and hurting herself. But... “I’ll just take her. She can survive without the teddy for fifteen minutes.”

Tom nodded. He went and grabbed Ginny’s coat, and Marianne’s tiny one, bringing them both before slinging his own on. Ginny dressed Marianne in her little shoes and scarf, hitched her up to her shoulder, and crossed to the front door. They stepped outside; glanced up and down the corridor to check that no-one was watching.

“Hold on tight,” Tom reminded Ginny, linking his hand through her. “If either of you two get Splinched then I will not be happy.”

“Okelie-dokelie.” She gripped Tom’s hand tight, and held Marianne close to her.

Crack.

They disappeared, and, one swirling moment later, reappeared again.

A heavy weight pulled on Ginny's hand, so hard that she nearly fell down. She gasped out. The source of the problem, she found, was that Tom was somehow on the ground. She stared. She was the one who tripped, fell, stumbled, lost her balance. He was always to be counted on for staying upright.

He let go of her hand and tipped his head back with a low groan.

"Are you okay?" she asked worriedly, not sure what she was supposed to do. She offered her hand to help him up, but he refused.

"I just got dizzy," he muttered, pressing a hand to his forehead and closing his eyes. She remembered his headache, and hoped that he felt better soon.

"Do you feel better now?" she checked.

"I'm fine." He cleared his throat once, shook his head, and then straightened up fully. He fished out of his pocket a slim envelope and handed it to her. "Merry Christmas."

Ginny looked at him, curiosity burning through her eyes. She passed Marianne to Tom, and, her hands freed, opened the envelope. A handful of documents slid out, and she scan-read the first few pages.

Legal ownership of 54 Larter Close, Agnestle, London, to Mr. and Mrs...

Her brow furrowed in a frown. She looked up at Tom. "What is this?"

Smiling, Tom tilted his head to the right, his eyes flashing in the same direction. She followed his gaze, and her eyes landed on a house.

It was quite small, two floors high, and semi-detached. The door was green, which didn't go particularly well with the aging yellow of the once-cream bricks. Even worse was the contrast of the red roof-tiles. The garden was untidy but friendly-looking. However, the main thing

that Ginny noticed was that due to the placement of the door and window, the house looked as though it was smiling.

Her mouth fell open. "You bought this?"

"Two bedrooms; Near a park, and with good schools nearby; and completely paid for," Tom said simply.

He had already paid for it? The whole cost of it? That was ridiculous. It was... it was... a thought came to her. It was very similar to the other silly things that he had done or bought or made as 'contingency plans' for when he had thought he was dying. He didn't still believe that, did he?

"What do you think?" Tom asked with some apprehension.

Ginny took a deep breath, and told him the truth. "It is probably one of the ugliest houses that I have ever seen in my life – and I absolutely love it."

Tom smiled, evidently very pleased with himself. He'd taken a massive gamble on getting this. He shifted Marianne in his arms, and stretched out an arm to pull Ginny into his side and hug her tightly. He kissed her on the top of the head, and whispered again, "Merry Christmas." And yet, as the snow fell, the best part of the whole Christmas was this – just the three of them, actually together, and for once, gloriously without problems, as blissfully perfect as the snow before footprints.

xxx

PLEASE REVIEW. Next one will be up soon, soon, soon, I promise. I know I said that I would try to finish the trilogy before the summer, and I honestly did try. I'll do my best. I love every single one of you, by the way. I'm sure I've said that before.

Chapter Forty-Four: Like A Heartbeat

Ever since Tom's coughing fit, two weeks ago, when he had collapsed holding Marianne, he had been recovering. He hadn't coughed blood since, and his only complaint was having a stinging headache twenty-four-seven. That didn't really matter to her. What was a headache, compared to the threat of losing him.

A heavy weight pulled on Ginny's hand, so hard that she nearly fell down. She gasped out. The source of the problem, she found, was that Tom was somehow on the ground. She stared. She was the one who tripped, fell, stumbled, lost her balance. He was always to be counted on for staying upright. He let go of her hand and tipped his head back with a low groan. "I just got dizzy," he muttered, pressing a hand to his forehead and closing his eyes. She remembered his headache, and hoped that he felt better soon.

It was quite small, two floors high, and semi-detached. The door was green, which didn't go particularly well with the aging yellow of the once-cream bricks. Even worse was the contrast of the red roof-tiles. The garden was untidy but friendly-looking. However, the main thing that Ginny noticed was that due to the placement of the door and window, the house looked as though it was smiling. Her mouth fell open. "You bought this?"

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xxx

The standard New Year's Eve party took place at the Hartwin house, as it had every year so far, due to many things. It was big enough for a party; there was no worry of noise disturbances to neighbours; they

could let off as many fireworks as they wanted; Jacob had a minor case of pyromania and so went a little crazy with the fireworks; the alcohol cupboard was almost a mile wide. Another added plus was that Leah being there made it easy to join baby-sitting duties. Eleanor Fionn, who had been invited this year, had agreed to take part in looking after Leah and Marianne, as she was pregnant, and didn't want to be influenced into drinking.

Ginny had wanted to wear her green dress, but it had been bought a year ago and was too small now. Instead she wore a vaguely Greek-looking white dress with a low back, which she had supposed matched her green handbag well enough. She realised now that it had been pointless to make such a fuss about whether her handbag matched her dress, as the bag was now sitting with Eleanor, Mrs. Hartwin, Leah and Marianne, in the living room.

The snow had continued falling thickly for two days after Christmas, but was now starting to melt down. Alden had cast a spell on the area of the acre-large grounds where they were holding the party, so that it was as warm as a summer dinner. Jars with captured pixies inside glowed bright colours from where they were draped over trees and bushes.

"Are we ready?" Jacob yelled to the cluster of people in front of him, which was littered with both his friends and Grace's friends.

"YEAH!" Ginny yelled with everyone else, and then-

BANG.

The first round of fireworks went off, and she jumped, cheering into the air. She slopped some of her champagne, but held it carefully away from her dress, and then downed the rest. She Banished the champagne flute, and skipped lightly across the grass, giggling.

Of course, they all knew perfectly well that they were only supposed to break out the drinks and fireworks once the New Year actually arrived, but they never did that. It was so much more fun this way.

“Dance with me!” Ginny demanded of Grace, spinning her clumsily around as the music blared, barely audible over the roar of fireworks. They twirled and jumped and attempted to head-bang so hard that all the colour rushed brightly into their faces.

“I don’t know what to do about Alden,” Grace said quietly.

“What?” Ginny frowned.

“I said, I don’t know what to do about Alden!” Grace repeated, more loudly this time, but still soft enough that no-one else would hear.

“What do you mean?”

“Well-”

“What?”

“I haven’t said anything yet!” Grace shouted. “What I was going to say... well, I just don’t know what to do anymore about him. He hasn’t spoken to me since I kissed Luke to make Beth jealous.”

“I suggest you snog his face off!” Ginny said after a moment’s careful thought.

Grace grinned. “That’s what I was always saying to you, and you never took my advice!”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot – because I somehow got married to Tom without ever snogging his face off!” Ginny called back sarcastically. “I did take your advice, and look where it got me! Funnily, it is actually a good idea! Just do it, Grace!”

With a heavy sigh, Grace shrugged. “Whatever. I think I’ll just confront him and switch the blame. That’ll be fun.”

“What?”

Not even bothering to answer, Grace turned and left.

Oh dear. This is going to be depressing, Ginny thought. She scanned the partying men and women for Tom, and found him standing by the drinks table, setting down a champagne flute. As she watched, he picked up another and swallowed it down in one mouthful.

She walked towards him, anxious. "Are you alright?"

He picked up yet another and gulped it down. "I'm fine," he said, a flicker of a smile lighting across his lips. "It's just my head again. I think I'll actually get some decent medicine when we get home."

"Does it hurt worse than normal?"

He didn't directly answer the question. "Honestly, I'm fine." He reached out, as though he was considering grabbing another champagne glass... but decided against it. He grabbed the bottle instead, and walked off, shaking his head repetitively.

Well, Ginny knew an 'okay-go-away-now' gesture when she saw one, so she decided to leave him be.

The countdown began.

Fifty-nine. Fifty-eight. Fifty-seven. Fifty-six.

She looked around and saw a montage of events unfolding in front of her.

Jacob lit another firework. BANG.

Fifty-one. Fifty. Forty-nine. Forty-eight.

Only Jacob's friends were now doing the drinking and the jumping and the counting down. All of Grace's friends were somewhat preoccupied.

Louise and Will slow-danced, eyes closed, pressed together as though they were the only two people in the world.

Luke stared at Beth like a blind man seeing the sun.

Alden stared at Grace with exactly the same expression.

Forty. Thirty-nine. Thirty-eight. Thirty-seven.

The flash of colours in the sky.

Tom stumbled, and leant against a tree trunk for support, gasping for breath. He tipped the champagne bottle to his lips. Pain twisted his face.

Jacob laughed at something, lit another one and another. BANG. BANG. Like a heartbeat.

Will kissed Louise lightly, whispered something to her. Her blue eyes opened wide, amazed, as though she could scarcely believe what she was hearing. Her mouth hung slightly open.

Luke stormed across the grass to Beth, his face set. Beth watched him with wary eyes that didn't know what to expect.

Grace swallowed champagne for courage and glanced over at Alden. Their eyes met. Silence stretched between them that said so much more than words could.

Tom stared blindly forwards, still by the tree.

Twenty-four. Twenty-three. Twenty-two. Twenty-one.

BANG. BANG. Like a heartbeat.

Will pulled a small black box from his pocket. He didn't even get to open it before Louise started hyperventilating, flapping her hands in front of her face as she gasped and gasped. "Oh my God," Ginny heard.

Luke grabbed Beth's face, almost roughly, and yet so tenderly- it seemed as she was breaking beneath his hands and becoming

something better and more beautiful – and kissed her as hard as he could.

Grace and Alden simply looked at each other.

Tom stared blankly forwards. The fireworks above, like flares, lit up the sheer paleness of his features.

Seventeen. Sixteen. Fifteen. Fourteen.

BANG. BANG. A heartbeat.

“Louise Marie Armstrong, I love you,” Will said, and for the first time ever in all that Ginny had known him, he looked truly flustered. He dropped to one knee fairly elegantly, and flipped the box open. “And... I was wondering, you see, if you would be interested in marrying me?”

Beth shoved Luke away, and slapped him around the face as hard as she could. “What the hell was that?” she shouted at him, furious, but he shut her up, kissing her again, just as fiercely as the first time, completely disregarding the red hand-mark on his face.

Grace and Alden had come to an impasse. Grace had chased him and chased him until she couldn’t chase him anymore. And she had given up. Now, Alden, realising the truth, had chased her and chased her in return. And had given up. And neither were willing to be the one, who, after they both recognised how the other had felt all along, would crawl back for a second, a third, a tenth chance.

Tom stared without seeing. There was an icy sheen of perspiration on his face now. Ginny followed what he was looking at, but could only find the Hartwin house in the distance. She thought maybe he was worrying about Marianne. Maybe thinking about his stupid ‘contingency plans’ and the house and the will and how he still probably thought deep, deep down, that he was actually going to die.

Ten. Nine. Eight.

The shouts of the countdown grew louder and more drunken.

BANG. BANG.

Colours flooded the sky.

“Oh my God,” Louise said again. “Oh my God, I don’t – I don’t – um – yes!” She flushed bright pink, as she always did. “Yes, Will. Yes, yes, yes!”

She didn’t wait to let him put the ring on her finger; she threw her arms around his neck as held on tightly. He stood up and lifted her into the air, hugging her so tightly it looked as though they were one person, but Ginny knew that as far as their hearts were concerned, they might as well be.

“I love you,” she said as he kissed her face.

And yet, as the countdown grew closer to midnight, it seemed to slow down, warp, and twist into forever.

Seven... Six....

The fireworks boomed and crashed, like a heartbeat.

Beth pulled away. “You are so annoying!” she gasped, but somehow couldn’t find the glare on her face.

“I know,” Luke said, his expression deadly serious. “And if you wouldn’t mind, I’d quite like to be the most annoying person in your life for the foreseeable future.”

She stared at him, her grey eyes swirling.

“You,” he said, “are unlike anyone I have ever met in my life.”

“And how many girls have you told that to, hey?” she demanded coldly, her eyes narrowed.

He bent his face close to hers. Ginny couldn't hear what he was saying as his lips moved, but she knew that he would be telling her the complete truth: "I have never told that to anyone."

Five.

The steady beat of the fireworks, like a heartbeat, took everyone's pulses to the same beat.

Grace on one side of the swirl of people. Alden on the other. In blinding flashes, the fireworks would take their view of each other away, or someone would dance between them, but it always came back to the same thing.

"Luke meant nothing." Grace was the first to speak. She only spoke just loud enough to be heard over the general din. Ginny didn't know how Alden heard. She didn't know if he heard at all. She didn't know if their words even mattered.

"Then why?"

"Because I needed someone."

"Why not me?"

Four.

"I gave you my conditions." Grace smiled sadly. "When you first told me that you... that you loved me..." her voice shook there, "I gave you my conditions."

And then, suddenly, as though they'd been there all along – Ginny certainly hadn't seen them move – they were standing face to face in the middle.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say," Alden said quietly. "I don't know what you want. I love you. I promise you that I will look after you until the day that you die. I need you. I want you. And I love you. And I'm sorry if that's not good enough. I'm sorry... that I was never good enough."

Three.

Grace's eyes suddenly filled with tears that were brighter than the fireworks, more scalding to see, and even in their salty bitterness showed a happiness that should have needed a painting to portray, but her eyes were enough. "I'm yours," she whispered.

"What?"

Ginny's mind flashed back to the Castledon-Bailey train station, when Grace had tried to run away with Luke.

"Say it," she said suddenly, unexpectedly. "The one thing you never said – say it!" Grace was almost pleading, but angrily. It was surreal. "It's the easiest thing in the world. Say it, and I'm yours."

"The one thing you never said," Grace said softly.

"I never – but – I must have – I couldn't have not-" Alden struggled for words. He put a hand on his cheek, holding his temple. "Oh my God. I never... I..." He closed his eyes, looking as though he was preparing to fall backwards into the ground. "I am so sorry. I – I'm so stupid – and sorry – and– I'm–"

Two.

"Sshh." Grace put a finger to his lips – finally he was her height, and maybe even a few centimetres taller – and then kissed him so lightly that it must have been just a breath of wind on his mouth to Alden. "I love you," she whispered, twining her arms tighter around his neck.

They fit together so perfectly, like the back and forth pump of a heartbeat; working so separately, so incredibly different, and yet fitting like the jigsaw of a heartbeat.

ONE.

“HAPPY NEW YEAR'S EVE!” The loudest fireworks of all split the sky, shattering the darkness.

Ginny's eyes filled with tears. So long Grace had been waiting for her fairytale ending, and it was finally here. She couldn't believe that everyone could be so happy all in one space. It almost seemed too good to be true – but that sort of pessimism, she thought laughingly, was Tom's expertise. ‘Everything is so right that something must be wrong’.

She spun to find him, a grin splitting her face.

Tom was no longer frozen. He doubled up, clutching at the tree for support, his hands stark white, sweaty, skeletal – and he was throwing up.

Oh, for God's sake, Tom, she thought, her sigh tinged with anxiety and annoyance. That's what you get for drinking an entire bottle of champagne in less than an hour.

Her blood then ran icy as the sky was lit again, and she saw.

He was vomiting blood.

She was paralysed for a moment, just staring as he gagged and retching. She saw the blood was already a wide-spread pool across the grass, melting what little snow was left, and distorting its brilliant white.

“Tom,” she whispered in horror.

He coughed, spat, vomited again. His knees gave out slightly, and he had to cling tighter to the tree, blood dripping from his face. His face partly lifted, she could in slow motion detect the redness of blood in his eyes; blood spilling from his ears, matting his hair tightly to his head; the blood dripping from his nose; the blood wet on his lips. Those bloody eyes focused on her, agonised.

And then he collapsed.

xxx

MWAHAHAHA. Oh, you didn't seriously think it was all going to work out? Not when I was dropping hints about headaches and being dizzy? God. Some people. d: Well, please review, and I'll post the next chapter... Love you.

Chapter Forty-Five: Every Shard Of Everything

Her blood then ran icy as the sky was lit again, and she saw.

He was vomiting blood.

She was paralysed for a moment, just staring as he gagged and retching. She saw the blood was already a wide-spread pool across the grass, melting what little snow was left, and distorting its brilliant white. "Tom," she whispered in horror.

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xxx

"Tom!" she cried, brain firing back into full gear.

She ran to him, falling to her knees in the blood – unusual blood, thick, syrupy, as though it wasn't just blood, but something else, something sinister.

He was shaking, shuddering, in a seizure of what looked to be excruciatingly painful proportions; cringing against the grass. And viscous blood was streaming down his face. Now that he was horizontal, there was nowhere for it to go, and she could hear it pooling in his mouth, she could hear him gagging and choking-

"Grace!" she screamed, twisting back to look over her shoulder.
"GRACE!"

Within a moment, they were all around her – Grace and Luke crouching beside Tom, the Healers of the group; Louise and Will standing a safe distance, holding hands; Alden and Jacob standing behind Grace, hovering for any way that they could help. Beth looked awkward near Luke.

Ginny couldn't breathe. The tears were spilling down her face. She was getting in Grace's and Luke's way, she knew that, but she wasn't going to move.

Luke suddenly froze with his hand behind Tom's head, close to the top of his neck. "Shit. Grace, feel that."

Grace's hand slipped to where Luke's was, and the expression on her face changed immediately as well. "It's ruptured, hasn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Intracerebral haemorrhage?" Grace asked.

"Yup."

All of the air left Ginny's lungs as though she'd been punched. "Did you just say haemorrhage?" she whispered.

"And then, suddenly, all the strength was draining from her so quickly, like someone had pulled a plug. Fevered – hot first, then cold, then coughing like her lungs were on fire... then she died. Brain haemorrhage, or something like that. I don't know exactly."

No. No. This wasn't happening. Not now – not when everything was so perfect-

Grace ignored her. She dragged her wand from her pocket and flicked it, muttering under her breath. A deadly shiny scalpel appeared in her hand.

"No," Luke said, grabbing her hand. "No, don't. There isn't time."

"We have to do something," Grace pleaded.

"What's going on?" Ginny interrupted shakily, sounding – and feeling – as though she too could collapse at any second, in a dead faint. She struggled to stay conscious, for Tom. She needed to be here. She needed him.

“Nothing, Ginny, don’t worry,” Grace said brightly. “He’s going to be fi-”

“Do you know what an aneurysm is?” Luke asked, completely disregarding Grace’s efforts at making light of the situation. His always playful, happy face was carved in stone. She didn’t know whether to be grateful for his honesty or horrified at his insensitivity. It didn’t matter. She was numb anyway. “No? It’s basically a messy dilation of a blood vessel. Tom has one in the arteries at the base of the brain. It’s ruptured – and I’ll be honest with you, Ginny, that’s not a good thing.”

“He’s haemorrhaging,” Ginny finished brokenly.

“What does that mean?” Beth asked quietly from behind Luke, horror etched palely onto her face.

“His brain is bleeding,” Luke muttered.

If Ginny had been standing, then she would have fallen down a long time ago. However, she was kneeling, and so instead she swayed and fell back onto her heels. “Oh my God.”

He’s dying.

And then, as she consciously thought it, consciously said it – it became terrifyingly real – and she was dragging in air, but she couldn’t breathe, she couldn’t breathe – he was dying – and Marianne – and the house – and the will – he had known – he had known – he had lied to her, said that he was getting better, lied and lied and lied and she had believed him – and what could she have done? What could she do?

Her breath was coming in high, shaky gasps, tears waterfaling down her cheeks coldly. “No – no – no – he said – he said he would be alright – he told me – he said that he wasn’t going to – he told me-”

Tom had long since fallen unconscious. His skin already had that thick, grey tinge to it, making him look somehow heavy and more solid, as though he was already preparing to never move again. He

had long since stopped shaking, but the blood on his face was thicker and darker and uglier and bitter and terrible – and it was in his mouth, and she could hear him choking on it-

“He’s choking!” she cried hysterically. “He’s – he’s – get it out – just – help him – please – no-”

“Jake!” Grace called, setting down her wand, no longer casting spells or wiping away the blood. She turned to her brother, now crouched beside her, and whispered quickly to him. Not quietly enough for Ginny to escape what they were saying. “Jake, get her away from here. He’s... he’s not going to make it. And it’s not going to pretty when he goes.”

Ginny stared at them. “No,” she choked out.

Grace whipped around to look at her friend. There were tears in her eyes too. “Ginny – Ginny, I’m sorr-“

“No. No.” Ginny shook her head. “No, he’s going to be – he’s not going to – he can’t-”

Jacob came behind her and took her arm. “Come on, Ginny, you need to come and calm down. Come on, it’s okay.”

“No!” she shouted. “I’m not – I’m not leaving him-”

And then Jacob was tugging her to her feet and pulling her backwards and his arms wrapped around her waist to drag her away – and she was kicking and screaming and struggling and no no no Tom was back there and he was sick and it was all her fault all her stupid fault-

“NO!” she screamed at the top of her lungs, writhing and twisting to get away, hopelessly, as hopelessly as it had always been when she tried to get away from Tom during one of her fights, and the agony began again, anew, afresh, more searing- “NO! You can’t – YOU CAN’T-”

“Ginny, it’s going to be alright, trust me, it’ll pass, we just need to get you inside-”

“I heard what Grace said, you idiot!” Ginny howled, tears scarring her face. “I know – I HAVE TO BE THERE – they have to – TOM – NO!”

The voices still floated over from beside the tree.

“Luke, I can’t just – I have to help him – she’s always been there for me – we have to do something-”

“What? What can we do?” Luke’s voice was angry. “Look at him, Grace! He’s GONE!”

Ginny screamed, long and loud and piercing and every piece, every bit, every broken shard of everything she had was in that scream, echoing forever and ever and ever-

And she considered Marianne – if Marianne died now, would it bring him back – could she do that to her daughter – could she do that to herself – was it too late already – but she had to do something, anything, because she was nothing without him-

“Hermione? Mione, did you hear the news? Harry got a-” the words were never finished because Ginny ran into her best friend’s room and came to see the bushy-haired Muggleborn on her bedroom floor, red and sticky and somehow a lot smaller than Ginny ever remembered, because her arms were in the corner, and her legs were mutilated, and her head was GONE and her best friend was in pieces, and she was screaming, screaming, screaming –

Blood, pooling around her feet. Ron’s screams echoed and echoed, of absolute agony, his face draining of all colour as his body rapidly emptied of blood onto the floor around her... her, screaming, screaming, screaming –

He was vomiting blood. She was paralysed for a moment, just staring as he gagged and retched. She saw the blood was already a wide-spread pool across the grass, melting what little snow was left, and dyeing its brilliant white scarlet. She whispered, “Tom” in horror but it

was too late. He coughed, spat, vomited again. His knees gave out slightly, and he had to cling tighter to the tree, blood dripping from his face. His face partly lifted, she could in slow motion detect the redness of blood in his eyes; the blood dripping from his nose; the blood wet on his lips. Those bloody eyes focused on her, agonised. And then he collapsed, and she was screaming, screaming, screaming-

“What? What can we do?” Luke’s voice was angry. “Look at him, Grace! He’s GONE!” and she was screaming, screaming, screaming-

She wanted to fall to her knees, collapse, never get up, just to lie in the bloody, snowy grass and die, go to sleep and never wake up – leave it all behind – if she could just have him-

And then she remembered.

Tom had a contingency plan. And she had one too.

With new, burning strength, Ginny wrenched away from Jacob – kicking him in the shin, between the legs, and upper-cutting him as hard as she could, her knuckles splintering under the extreme force – and she sprinted like she’d never sprinted before, like these were new legs that could take her anywhere he was.

“Ginny!” Eleanor was in the doorway, Mrs. Hartwin hovering shortly behind her. “We heard screaming – what’s going on?”

“Get out of the way,” she rushed out, trying to push past the blonde. Eleanor grabbed her – just as Jacob had – just as Tom had, so many times, to calm her down, to protect her, to make her feel better –

Silently, Ginny crumpled. She screwed up her face in a wince, preparing for the pain that would doubtlessly come when her fragile, weak skull met the hard, polished obsidian. Briefly she pondered if she would actually smash her head in. However, gratefully, long arms swooped around her and she was caught, before being pulled back onto her feet. “See, Peregrine, my definition of walking is being able to safely manoeuvre on your feet,” said Riddle dryly, “preferably without collapsing.”

The break was called so that the jury could gather privately and decide on his punishment. As soon as Ginny had been able to control her lungs and stop screaming, she had whirled around so fast that she knocked over a chair, and fled from the trial room. She ran down the emergency exit stairs. She had to escape. They could sentence him to anything now. Torture. Life sentence in Azkaban. Dementor's Kiss. Somehow he must have guessed that she would run this way, because he was there, halfway up the stairs, and grabbed her before she could run past him.

Unluckily, the person standing quietly behind the till was the last person that she wanted anything to do with. Her face drained of colour, hidden as her head stayed bowed low. She wished that she could hide behind her hair, but it was tied back in a ponytail. "Ten Sickles." There was a soft clinking noise as coins were passed over the counter, and as soon as Ginny was certain that Grace had handed the money over, she turned away and moved as quickly as she could towards the door. Grace and Philippa could find her later. Footsteps sounded behind her. She ran. Blood pounding through her skull, Ginny spun down a random side-alley between two buildings, breaking into a hard sprint as soon as she was out of the crowds-Tom's cold hand grabbed the crook of her elbow and spun her backwards.

Alden's eyes narrowed to lethal slits, and he stormed angrily across the room, making quick time for all that he had grown since they'd first met. Seeing that there was going to be trouble, Ginny struggled to her feet to intervene. "Don't!" she gasped, but pain overwhelmed her balance and she tripped. Tom grabbed her shoulders to keep her upright.

She screamed at him, punching harder, the taut paleness of her freckled knuckles splitting as they bounced off harder, less sympathetic bones like his elbows and shoulders, bright blood streaming down her wrists as well as trickling down her chin from her broken lip as tears flung themselves down her faces with startling velocity. "Stop it – hey, stop that-" He grabbed the tops of her arms, trying to hold her still and stop her from destroying him, or herself, or the whole apartment in the process. "Ginevra."

“GET AWAY FROM ME!” she screamed, and shoved past them.

Racing through the corridors, her lungs burning, her heart thundering hard, unnecessarily, stupidly hard – how could her heart – how dare her heart – pound so, and how could she not spare a few beats per second for Tom?

Half-blinded by tears, she snatched up her green handbag and threw out the contents. Then she dropped to her knees, smearing blood across the carpet, and scrambled through the mess. Eyeliner, some money, her wand, more eyeliner, a pocket-watch –

-and a Time-Turner.

She didn't have Dumbledore's fancy wand, but she didn't care. If it didn't work – if she was Splinched – or if she died – or if she disappeared into the abyss of time forever – then it wouldn't be such a loss. She fumbled for the hourglass – no. She stopped. She'd had a better idea than her previous idea. She turned the hourglass the other way, around and around; slipped it over her head; pointed her wand.

“Portus.”

It was no more than a croak from her tear-tortured throat, but it was spoken all the same.

There was a moment where nothing happened, in which she closed her blurry eyes and tried to stop herself from shaking. She would get him back. She would get him back. And she disappeared.

xxx

Well, it is called Fast-Forward, after all. The title tells it all. Rewind: she goes back in time. Press Play: she stays happily where she is. Fast-Forward: ... And yes, OMG, I did just kill Tom. In case people weren't quite sure.

Medical explanation (and if there are any doctors reading this who want to correct me, feel free, I got this info off the website): blood

vessels swelled up at the bottom of his brain – courtesy of Marvolo – which burst and all the brain tissue and crap started bleeding out of his ears and nose. Lovely. (:

I won't be updating for about a week, because I'm going on my army camp thing again, but the next chapter is almost finished, so when I get back I should post the update pretty damn quick. PLEASE REVIEW.

CHP46